

Fall 2007

# Beyond "English language learner": Second language writers, academic literacy, and issues of identity in the United States high school

Christina M. Ortmeier-Hooper  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation>

---

## Recommended Citation

Ortmeier-Hooper, Christina M., "Beyond "English language learner": Second language writers, academic literacy, and issues of identity in the United States high school" (2007). *Doctoral Dissertations*. 401.  
<https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/401>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

BEYOND “ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER”:  
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS, ACADEMIC LITERACY, AND ISSUES OF  
IDENTITY IN THE U.S. HIGH SCHOOL

BY

CHRISTINA M. ORTMEIER-HOOPER

Baccalaureate of Art Degree, University of Massachusetts, 1995.  
Master of Art in Teaching, University of New Hampshire, 1998.

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
In  
English

September, 2007

UMI Number: 3277145

Copyright 2007 by  
Ortmeier-Hooper, Christina M.

All rights reserved.

#### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform 3277145

Copyright 2007 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

©2007

Christina M. Ortmeier-Hooper



This dissertation has been examined and approved.



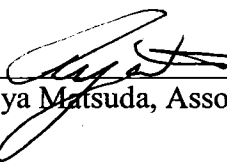
---

Dissertation Director  
Paul Kei Matsuda, Associate Professor of English



---

Thomas R. Newkirk, Professor of English



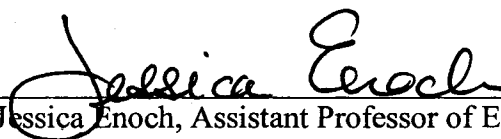
---

Aya Matsuda, Associate Professor of English



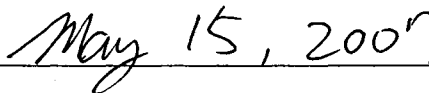
---

Judy Sharkey, Assistant Professor of Education



---

Jessica Enoch, Assistant Professor of English  
University of Pittsburgh



---

Date

## **DEDICATION**

For my parents, Lothar and Waltraud Ortmeier, whose courage, determination, and stories of “coming to America” continue to inspire me.

For Tom, whose love and support turns inspiration into reality.

•

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*If I have built my castles in the sky, my work need not be lost, I must now build the foundations under them.*

- Henry David Thoreau

I continue to build my castles in the sky and to construct the foundations beneath them. But I do not build alone. The foundation—the bricks and mortar—of this dissertation was shaped by the many people who provided me with support and encouragement throughout the process.

My sincere thanks go to Paul Kei Matsuda, my dissertation advisor, for his continued encouragement and support of my work. Throughout my graduate program, Paul helped me solidify my knowledge of second language writing and composition. His own enthusiasm for scholarship has motivated and inspired me to ask my own questions, to follow my own research pursuits, and to take an active role in the profession.

I would also like to thank other members of my dissertation committee: Thomas Newkirk, Jessica Enoch, Aya Matsuda, and Judy Sharkey. I am honored by the dedication and interest that they have shown in my work and my development as a teacher and scholar.

I came to the University of New Hampshire in order to work with Thomas Newkirk. Tom's example as a scholar and teacher remains at the heart of most of the work I do. I remember a conversation at the beginning of my graduate program when I ask Tom about the key to a successful career. He simply answered, "It is about the work."

The work leads me.” When I have questioned some of the other elements of my doctoral experiences, Tom’s words gave me the inspiration and grounding to continue. His work with teachers through his research and the UNH Literacy Institutes remains a model for my own academic pursuits.

I would also like to thank Aya Matsuda, Jessica Enoch and Judy Sharkey—who have all provided me with a network of support and have provided me with powerful, sustaining models for the possibilities for women in academia. Aya’s friendship and professional advice has been a steadfast source of encouragement throughout my doctoral program. Her teaching style and pedagogy inspire me to hone my own skills at the front of the classroom. Judy Sharkey gave me numerous opportunities to explore teacher education, to reenvision my own teaching, and to reflect upon my own transition from teacher to teacher researcher. Jessica Enoch expressed such enthusiasm for my work and my development as a scholar. I have treasured her close readings of earlier papers and her advice on my career path.

I would like also like to thank Cinthia Gannett who made me believe that a middle school teacher and mom could indeed successfully complete a doctoral degree and pursue a career in academia. Cinthia introduced me to the world of composition, writing centers, and writing-across-the-curriculum. Throughout my years at UNH, she has remained an inspiration and a source of encouragement.

I would also like to acknowledge the important teachers and professors who have influenced my teaching, my research, and my understanding of the classroom—Marjorie Burdette, Mary Reilly Potter, Professor William Moebius, Professor Susan Cocalis, and Professor Susan Franzosa. I am also appreciative of the community of scholars,

particularly in the L2 writing community, including Linda Harklau, Xiaoming Li, Danling Fu, Linda Lonon Blanton, Sarah Hudelson, Carole Edelsky, Deborah Crusan, and Gwen Gray Schwartz. They have inspired my research and generously provided me with thoughtful questions and insights over the years.

I am grateful to the University of New Hampshire Graduate School for supporting my work with a Dissertation Fellowship from 2006-2007 which gave me the time and space to concentrate on my research and my writing. I would also like to thank New England Teachers of English Speakers of Other Languages (NNETESOL) for a research award which provided me with the necessary research equipment for this project.

I also wish to extend thanks to my writing group—Michelle Cox, Katherine Tirabassi, Michael Michaud, Abby Knoblauch, and Meagen Rodgers. We met every other week and exchanged drafts of our work-in-progress. Their insights, close readings, and sense of humor provided me with the motivation to continue and the willingness to write and rethink multiple drafts, leads, and chapters. I would also like to thank the graduate student community at UNH. Historically, the UNH doctoral program in composition studies has fostered a wonderful, supportive community of graduate students. I entered the program with Michelle Cox and Katherine Tirabassi, and our friendship over the years has fueled and sustained me. We have taken classes together, shared our writing, collaborated on syllabi, explored teaching dilemmas, and presented together at conferences. Along the way, we have forged a strong friendship that has guided me through the ups-and-downs of graduate school, the moments of self-doubt, and the frustrations of trying to find my voice as a writer and researcher. I would also like to thank the many current and former UNH graduate students who have offered advice and

guidance over the years, including Christopher Dean, Dot Kasik, Amy Zenger, Megan Fulwiler, Kuhio Walters, David Edwards, Bronwyn Williams and Joleen Hanson.

I am also grateful to the students who participated in this study. I appreciate the time they gave to meet for interviews, the sharing of their writing, and the openness with which they engaged in this project. Those participants, who must remain anonymous, made this project possible and they also reminded me of the wonderful enthusiasm and possibilities that adolescent writers bring to their writing. It was a joy and privilege to get to know each of them and to work with them over the course of this project. I am also appreciative of the schools and teachers who allowed me into their classrooms and shared their concerns, along with the possibilities and challenges of their work. They are a dedicated group of professionals who endeavor to meet the needs of their students in the face of continuing pressures of public school education. I am grateful for their insights and their time.

This dissertation also owes much to the various people that have helped me to fulfill my role as a mother, as well as my role as a student/teacher. To the Miss Tammys, Miss Dees, and Miss Kathys that kept my boys happy, safe, and enthusiastic about learning new things—you all remind me why good teachers are so special. I thank my sister-in-laws, Laura, Mary, and Christine, and my mother-in-law, Ellen, for all the last-minute babysitting and cups of tea. I also am grateful to my sisters, Ilona and Andrea, for their continued support, for their advice, and for providing wonderful examples for the balancing act between motherhood and career. I thank my dear friends, Angelique DeCoste, Nicole Spieles, and Johannah Morgen, for their encouragement. My deepest appreciation and thanks goes to my mother, Waltraud, who took loving care of my sons

as I feverishly wrote seminar papers and comprehensive exams, and to both my parents, whose life stories, courage, and aspirations, continue to inspire me. Their support has always reminded me that there must be a real purpose for the work I pursue. They remind me to stay focused and grounded in all my pursuits. This work is dedicated to them both.

Finally, thank you to my husband and my children. My husband Tom never doubted this path and always supported my dreams. I am grateful for his love and support throughout this process. So many years ago, he signed onto this life we are building, neither of us knowing the paths we were embarking upon, and he has been a steadfast partner, an insightful listener, and my best friend. To Sean and Zachary, my boys, you will always be my greatest gifts. You have made the past six years beautiful and fulfilling, and your presence has always reminded me to treasure each moment, to work with the purpose of creating a better world, and to value the aspects of my life that give it meaning and purpose.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
ABSTRACT .....	xv

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. NEW WINDOWS INTO ACADEMIC LITERACY AND THE SECOND LANGUAGE WRITER.....	10
Achievement and Immigrant Students in America .....	10
Academic Literacy: Stretching the term .....	16
The Second Language Student in High School.....	22
Earlier Studies .....	22
Studies since No Child Left Behind (NCLB).....	27
Conclusion .....	32
II. DEFINING IDENTITY: SETTING THE THEORETICAL FRAME .....	33
Coming to Terms with Identity: My Own and Others.....	34
Making the Writing and Identity Connection in Composition Studies .....	36
Performance Theories .....	38
Social Identity Theory.....	42
Second Language Acquisition and Identity .....	47
Social identity, “ESL” and High School: Putting forth a theoretical frame .....	53
III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN.....	57
Questions and the Search for Answers: Designing the Study.....	57



Case Study Method.....	58
Community Context.....	61
The School Contexts.....	62
Selecting Participants.....	65
Data Collection.....	68
Interviews.....	69
Focus Groups.....	72
Mapping Social Influences.....	73
Onsite Fieldwork.....	75
Teacher Surveys.....	75
Exit Interviews and Final Surveys.....	76
Data Analysis.....	77
Two Concerns: Limits of the Method and Reincarnations.....	78
 IV. INTRODUCING THE STUDENTS.....	 80
Paul.....	80
Ken.....	84
Miguel.....	86
Therese.....	88
Wisdom.....	92
Conclusion.....	96
 V. CORRIDORS AND CLASSROOMS: THE SHIFTING NATURE OF IDENTITY IN HIGH SCHOOL.....	 98
Categorization: High School Groups, Institutional Markers, and Identification.....	101
Student Groups and Tracking.....	101
Tracking and Categorization at Mill River North.....	104
Identification: Being members of the ELL Group at Mill River North.....	110
Perceptions of “ELL” at Mill River North.....	111
Comparison: The Sliding Scale of ELL, or “I’m Not ELL, Those Other Kids Are...”.....	118
Identification: Shifts in ELL Identity Across Institutional Contexts.....	123
Miguel at Mill River North.....	123
Miguel at Mill River South.....	125
Self-categorization: Wisdom reclaims the ELL identity.....	128
First Impressions.....	129
The Conflict.....	131
“She Doesn’t Know Who I Am”.....	134
The Paradox of “Being ELL”.....	137
The Aftermath.....	139
Conclusion.....	140

VI. NOTEBOOKS, NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, AND WRITING INSTRUCTION: REINSCRIBING THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF ‘ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ IN THE CLASSROOM .....	143
Survival 101: Second Language Writers in an Age of Assessment .....	145
The Prevalence of Survival Genres .....	149
The Five-Paragraph Essay: The Ultimate Survival Genre .....	156
Implications of Survival Genres on Students in terms of Social Identity.....	163
Arhetorical Approaches to the Teaching of Writing .....	166
An Arhetorical Writing Process .....	168
Arhetorical Teacher Response and Assessment .....	179
Exceptions and Attempts to Vary Genres and Approaches .....	188
Conclusion .....	190
VII. CHALLENGES, COMPETENCIES, AND IDENTITY ON THE WRITTEN PAGE: STUDENTS (RE)WRITING TOWARD POSITIVE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC IDENTITIES.....	194
Stumbling Blocks: Challenges and Struggles of Writing in a Second Language .....	195
Ken.....	197
Therese.....	200
Building Blocks: Competencies, Places of Validation, and Moves Toward a Positive Academic and Social Identity .....	208
Ken: Invoking Culture, Building a Bilingual Identity, and Blogging .....	211
Paul: Genre Awareness, Pop Culture, and Video Games .....	218
Therese: “Being Bilingual” as a Demonstration of Competency .....	225
Wisdom: Competencies in World Englishes, Music Production, and Poetry .....	230
Miguel: Complicating the Question of Competencies.....	236
Conclusion (...and When Things Fall Away...).....	243
VIII. BUILDING BRIDGES: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	247
Furthering the Writing-Identity Connection .....	251
Implications for First-Year Composition.....	253
Shifting Our Ideological Framework on ESL Writers.....	257
The Neglected “R’s”: Writing and Rhetoric .....	261
A Cross-Disciplinary Call for Active Engagement in K-12 Issues and Schools .....	266
Epilogue: Personal Encounters and Public Voices.....	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	274
APPENDICES.....	281
Appendix A: Questionnaire 1.....	282
Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire – Research Project on Writing in High School.....	284
Appendix C: Wisdom’s mid-term essay with teacher’s comments.....	293
Appendix D: IRB Approval.....	294

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Tajfel and Turner's Components of Social Identity.....	45
Table 3.1	Brief summary of case study participants.....	67
Table 3.2	Ivanic's "Three Aspects of Writer Identity" and My Data Collection.....	69
Table 5.1	Academic Ability Grouping at Mill River North.....	104
Table 6.1	The Survival Genres.....	150

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Six Writing Questions.....	72
Figure 3.2 Social Influence Mapping Exercise.....	74
Figure 6.1 Paul’s essay on Freddy Krueger and Jason.....	160
Figure 6.2 Miguel’s notes on the Writing Process from his mainstream English class.....	171
Figure 6.3 Miguel’s example of drafting for his interview essay.....	172
Figure 6.4 Miguel’s first draft of the interview essay.....	176
Figure 6.5 Miguel’s final draft of the interview essay. ....	177
Figure 6.6 Ken’s first draft of his interview essay.....	184
Figure 7.1 Therese’s writing on “Who I am becoming” assignment.....	204
Figure 7.2 An Excerpt of Therese’s writing in Spanish.....	206
Figure 7.3 Ken’s Social Influence Map.....	216
Figure 7.4 Therese’s Resume.....	228
Figure 7.5 Wisdom’s Social Influence Map.....	232
Figure 7.6 Excerpt of Wisdom’s song, “Let It Go”.....	234
Figure 7.7 Miguel’s Social Influence Map.....	238

**ABSTRACT****BEYOND “ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER”:  
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS, ACADEMIC LITERACY, AND ISSUES  
OF IDENTITY IN THE U.S. HIGH SCHOOL**

by

Christina M. Ortmeier-Hooper

University of New Hampshire, September 2007

This study examines the writing experiences of U.S. adolescent second language writers and considers how students’ identities as “English Language Learners (ELL)” contributes to their learning, their sense of self, and their academic writing. Within the perspective that writing is a socially-embedded activity, I conducted five case studies documenting the academic writing experiences of immigrant students from various countries (Nigeria, Taiwan, Dominican Republic and El Salvador) during their first year of high school.

During the year-long study, I collected data from sources, including: student interviews, classroom observations, students’ writing samples, students’ social influence maps, and community/school artifacts. Using a theoretical framework derived from social identity theory and Ivanic’s work on writing and identity, I explored how students negotiated their social identities as “English Language Learners” in academic settings and analyzed the impact of “ELL identity” in the development of their writing skills in English and ELL classrooms.

Findings revealed that students found the institutional category of “English Language Learner,” often limited their social standing and academic opportunities in the classroom and wider school setting. Students’ writing instruction was often compromised by administrative pressures to meet federal/ state testing mandates, by a lack of teacher training in second language writing, and by the limited amount of classtime that was dedicated to discussions on writing and rhetorical analysis. As a result, students had limited exposure to advanced academic genres and to rich discussions on writing and rhetoric. Despite these curricular limitations, the students of their own volition worked to develop and demonstrate literacy and rhetorical competencies in English through other in-school and out-of school activities. These competencies, which included: genre awareness, rhetorical analysis, digital literacy, professional writing, and creative writing, underscored the rich literacy resources and critical thinking skills that L2 writers can bring to their writing and their writing classrooms.

These findings suggest several implications for composition theory and pedagogy, L2 writing, English education, and immigrant student education. The study offers insights into the lasting effects of institutional labels on students’ academic literacy development, and it adds to the growing body of research and pedagogy on identity and writing.

## INTRODUCTION

“Ms. O, am I always gonna be ELL?” asked Fanika, 14, as she looked over my shoulder and I began to sign off on her high school registration form. Her question was one that I heard often as middle school ELL Language Arts teacher, especially as my students completed their middle school years and headed off to high school.

We were in a basement classroom; there was a wall that divvied up the old science classroom into two classrooms. The wall only went about three-quarters of the way across, and although it provided a visual buffer between the two classes of students, the noise easily filters from one side of the wall to the other. It was built when the school administrators realized that there weren’t enough classrooms to support the growing number of English language learners and their teachers. The wall, along with the outdated textbooks, and our place in the basement of the building spoke volumes about the position of ELL teachers and students in the school.

I sat at my desk, and I heard the beginning level students on the other side of the wall learning the words for fruits and vegetables and the language needed for their upcoming field trip to the grocery store. On my side of the wall, my eighth-grade intermediate ELL students were working away, building story mobiles for the books they had read as part of their book clubs. At the single computer in the room, two students worked on captions, defining key plot turns and characters in their books. They were busy; there was a constant quiet chatter as they brainstormed and considered the design of their mobiles and the written text that would accompany them. One at a time, each

student approached my desk for a brief conference on their projects and to hand in their high school registration forms. It was April, and the end of their middle school days was approaching.

“Ms. O, am I always gonna be ELL?” asked Fanika again, bringing me back to the moment. Fanika with her shoulder-length brown hair and embroidered blue jeans was outspoken and bright; she carried with her a desire to go to medical school and become a doctor, a dream packed up along with the rest of her life when she fled Bosnia. As she repeated her question, her classmates looked up from their projects, eager to know my response. It was their question as well. There were 16 students in the classroom, and five different languages spoken among them. Some of them had been in United States for as little as eight months; others had been here for close to three years. They, too, had seen their schedules for their first year of high school: Physical Science, Algebra, Phys. Ed., Civics, English, and a section of ELL.

As I looked at Fanika’s registration form, I tried to think about the rational answer to her question. It was a tough call. It was her second year in the United States, and she had made tremendous strides over the past two years. Her test scores reflected that her spoken English was fluent and competent. Her reading scores had improved immensely over the past year, but she still struggled with textbook readings, like those from her mainstream science class. And her writing scores showed her as Limited English Proficient (LEP). She had worked hard, and she was doing well in her mainstream science and math classes, with the help of a homework tutor and an effort level that impressed her middle school teachers. Her grades were all A’s and B’s. She only took two ELL classes, including a Language Arts class with me that she routinely told me



“was a lot harder than what the other (native English speakers) are doing.” She wasn’t the first student to question her place as an “ELL student” and as her teacher, I found myself in the difficult position of telling her that yes, she had made great progress, but I was still concerned about her academic writing and reading, and her ability to negotiate beyond the high school tracking system that might keep her in lower level classes, despite her intelligence and her ambition to do college-prep work. Just a little more time, a little more practice.

I signed her form, knowing that my answer felt hollow to both of us.

### **The Question**

Five years later, the question Fanika raised, “Am I always going to be ELL?” stays with me. As a doctoral student in Composition Studies, I have spent the past five years, learning about writing, rhetoric, and writing pedagogy, and honing my skills and my knowledge as a college writing teacher and researcher. But the inherent question about the connection between writing and a writer’s identity has remained with me. For there is more to Fanika’s question than simply enrolling in “ELL” classes and learning a language; there are layers here. Learning another language is in its own right an achievement and a negotiation. To learn a new language means to negotiate around unfamiliar vocabulary, alphabets, word orders, and social norms. It means learning a new culture as well, and often negotiating that new landscape from the margins. For English language learners, particularly those immigrant and refugees living in the United States, those negotiations are particularly powerful because there is a layer of permanence; this is not simply a semester abroad. There are layers of assimilation,

nationalism, and identity that must be wrought anew. It means finding a new voice, and in the best of circumstances, melding it with the old.

But when Fanika asked about “being ELL,” I see now that her question spoke specifically to the place of English language learners in our schools. Her question was also inherently about status, about categories, about social groups, about stigma. As a middle school ELL teacher, I was typically inundated with requests to “get out of ESL.” The trend among most of my refugee and immigrant students had been to look, to sound, and to act as American as possible, as soon as possible. In my college teaching and research, immigrant students often admitted to me that they were eager to leave behind the label of “ESL” that they felt secondary school imposed on their identity as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> While at the middle school, I worked to “mainstream” students into as many classes as possible—homeroom, gym, art, music, computers, math, then science—providing as much support as they needed along the way in the form of tutoring. But I also knew that they often remained the “kids in the basement” for many of their native-English speaking peers and teachers.

As a writing teacher, I wondered what these questions of identity meant for my former middle school students as writers. How much of their academic achievement would depend on their ability to articulate their ideas and knowledge through writing? How would their “accented English,” both on paper and in person, affect the kinds of writing assignments they were assigned and the ways that they were responded to in the classroom? How would students, like Fanika, approach writing assignments and instruction—what would they draw upon in terms of past learning experiences, peers,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ortmeier-Hooper, Christina. “English May Be My Second Language, but I’m Not ‘ESL.’” *College Composition and Communication* (forthcoming.).

family, culture and language, both in and outside of the school, in terms of process and in terms of content? What role did an “ELL identity” play a role in student’s academic literacy development and achievement during the high school years? How were these students identified/labeled, and how did they identify themselves within the complex social microcosm that is the US high school, and how did that identity assist or problematize their development as academic English writers? And finally, I wondered when did students like Fanika stop being “English language learners”?

### **Dissertation Overview**

This study is an attempt to answer those questions. It is an attempt to move beyond the label of “ELL” to complicate our notions and our definitions of second language writers, particularly as they strive to move beyond ELL classrooms and programs and into mainstream English and across the wider disciplinary curriculum. The main text of this dissertation is divided into seven chapters.

In chapter one, “New Windows into Academic Literacy and the Second Language Writer,” I introduce the impetus for this study by exploring the growing numbers of immigrant students in our schools and the increasing importance of writing in education and workplace settings. I then provide an overview of how this study fits into the fields of composition and literacy studies. I review the theories and literature that frame and inform my dissertation, particularly focusing on the nature of our conversations on academic literacy, academic literacy development, and second language writing. I suggest that our discussion of academic literacy, as well as our research lenses, should become more inclusive by considering secondary schools and adolescent writers in those

discussions, and by considering the place of second language writers within those broader conversations.

In the chapter two, “Defining Identity: Setting the Theoretical Frame,” I provide an overview of the identity theories and studies that have informed our field’s understanding of the connection between writing and identity. I introduce Social Identity Theory as a useful lens, by which to examine the complex and shifting identities that second language students often negotiate in an educational setting like high school. I then establish the concept of “ELL identity,” that guides this dissertation, by looking at the literature on identity in second language acquisition in order to lay out the unique linguistic, cultural and social negotiations that second language learners bring to these discussions on writing and identity.

In chapter three, “Methodology and Research Design,” I describe my research method, including research design, setting, and participants. I also provide an in-depth discussion of my procedures for data collection and data analysis. This qualitative project focuses on case studies of five U.S. resident second language writers in their first-year of high school. The case studies are supplemented by the students’ writing samples, on-site field observations in their high schools and classrooms, school artifacts, and teacher surveys.

In chapter four, “Introducing the Students,” I provide portraits of each of five case study participants: Paul, Ken, Therese, Miguel, and Wisdom. The portraits provide rich, detailed descriptions of the students, their personalities, their literacy histories, their past schooling experiences, and their aspirations. These portraits form a backdrop for the thematically-structured findings chapters that follow.

In chapter five, “Corridors and Classrooms: The Shifting Nature of Identity in High School,” I argue that a student’s social identity is influenced by institutionally-imposed categories and wider institutional pressures. In negotiating toward positive social identities, students make moves to claim, resist or reclaim their placement in these categories. In support of this premise, I discuss the dynamics and positioning of second language students in U.S. high school settings, with particular attention how students’ social identity and social groups are formed by the academic tracking and institutional labels and categories. I share how the institutional category of English language learner (ELL) is often perceived as a negative social identity in school settings, where “being ELL” is associated with vulnerability, lack of intelligence, and deficiency. Using the framework of social identity theory, I explore how my student participants resisted, accepted, or reclaimed their identities as English language learners depending on their social and academic needs. I consider how their identity negotiations as English language learners is often fluid and paradoxical, dependent upon the institutional context and situational events that they are attempting to navigate.

In chapter six, “Notebooks, No Child Left Behind, and Writing Instruction: Reinscribing the Social Identity of “English Language Learners” in the Classroom,” I argue that a student’s social identity can be further constructed by curricular practices in the teaching of writing, which can often reinscribe and reaffirm the social identity set by institutional categories and labels. In support of this premise, I examine the survival nature of the writing curriculum experienced by my student participants and show how such an emphasis on “survival genres” and rhetorical writing instruction emphasizes writing-to-demonstrate rather than writing-to-communicate. I begin the chapter by

looking at how federal and state-mandated testing and the reporting of that testing data impacts second language students and the writing curriculum in U.S. public schools. I explore how the pressures to teach-to-the-test often means that students in ELL programs and lower-level academic tracks receive writing instruction and curriculum is based on surviving the tests and improving school-wide scores. For the second language writers in this study, these curricular practices often underscored their sense of their own identities as vulnerable and cognitively incapable of richer assignments and discourse.

In chapter seven, “Challenges, Competencies, And Identity On The Written Page: Students (Re)Writing Toward Positive Social And Academic Identities,” I argue that students’ social identities and writing experiences are not wholly constructed by their school categories and academic tracks. In the opening pages of the chapter, I acknowledge the challenges that the student face when writing in their second language. In particular, I note that these “stumbling blocks” are the facets of second language writers that are often the most visible to their teachers. In the second part of the chapter, however, I begin to dismantle this perception by pointing to the various competencies and “building blocks” of academic literacy that second language writers bring with them. I argue that second language writers often come into the classroom with a rhetorical savviness and a range of literacy competencies that are overlooked or underutilized in the academic setting. I explore case-by-case the kinds of strategies, techniques, and extra-curricular writing activities that the students engaged in, and I explore how student used these writing activities to help them move toward more positive social and academic identities.

Finally, in chapter eight, “Building Bridges: Discussions and Implications,” I summarize some of the key findings of the study and share the implications of my study for composition studies, second language writing, and teacher education.

In the end, I hope that the students’ voices and experiences will stay with readers. The experiences, feelings, frustrations and achievements that they have shared with me may well provide insight into the nuances of the kinds of identity negotiation that many students writers encounter as they find their way through the U.S. educational system. I believe that there is something to learn from their stories that will resonate across the divide that often separates ELL and English classrooms, whether they are in high school or college.

For Fanika and the other students on my side of the wall, I have not forgotten their questions, their faces, or their inextinguishable tenacity to succeed in a new country and a new language. Their promise and determination continues to guide my work as a teacher and a researcher.

## CHAPTER I

### NEW WINDOWS INTO ACADEMIC LITERACY AND THE SECOND LANGUAGE WRITER

#### Achievement and Immigrant Students in America

##### No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

##### Title III: Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students, Part A—English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement Act

*The purposes of this part are...to ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic achievement in English, and meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. (115 STAT. 1690)*

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that there were over 5.5 million English language learners (ELLs)<sup>2</sup> in the K-12 U.S. schools. The stakes for learning

---

<sup>2</sup> In the field of second language acquisition, there has been much debate and controversy over the terms used to describe non-native English speakers. Historically, the term “ESL” or “English-as-a-Second-Language” has been used to describe both programs and the speakers themselves. However, the term has often been scrutinized because it seems to privilege “English” and also because many “ESL” writers are indeed acquiring English as their third or even fourth language.

To combat that perspective, the term “ESOL,” or “English speaker of other languages” became more prevalent, and was deemed more respectful of the language skills these students already possessed. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Education has adopted the term “ELL” or “English language learner” in its federal education policies and statements. As a result, “English language learner (ELL)” has become the term of choice in most U.S. K-12 school settings, and there have been increasing references to the term at the post-secondary level.



English are high for these learners, not just in terms of basic communication skills, but in terms of the kinds of literacy skills they will need to be successful in school and in the workforce. In recent years, writing has become a more publicly visible, high stakes skill that can either open doors or close them. In one example, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) launched a writing initiative campaign in 2003, which placed writing and writing instruction at the forefront of its agenda. In another case, the College Board raised the importance of writing for high school seniors with the introduction of the writing component to the SAT College Entrance Exam. Furthermore, at many colleges and universities, writing exams and courses remain gateways to upper-level courses, majors, and even graduation. And beyond the classrooms, corporate American has chimed in as well, noting that “people who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion” (National Commission on Writing 3).

Without doubt, writing well in English is a “threshold skill,” that is necessary for achievement in both higher education and the workplace in the United States (National Commission on Writing 3). What does this mean for the 5.5 million English language learners in our schools and colleges? Research on second language writing tells us that writing in a second language is often the most difficult skill for second language users to

---

The term “ELL” is not without debate, because it raises questions about when, how, and where does a student stop being an “English language learner” and simply become an “English language user.” Throughout this study, this question of labels and terminology remains a subtext to the larger questions of identity and writing. For my part, I use the term “ELL” in speaking of federal and state level education policy and as a more universal term for second language students at the K-12 level. I also use the term “Second language (L2) writer” which is the term of choice used by most professionals in the field of second language writing. “Second language writer” focuses on a second language user’s positive linguistic achievements, rather than on the deficit model evoked by “English language learner.” In general, I use the term “second language writer” to speak about literature in the L2 writing field, to discuss about L2 writers across institutional settings, or to simply avoid using “ELL” when it is inappropriate to a given individual or setting.

master. Early research on second language acquisition by Jim Cummins and others pointed to the fact that students master basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), long before they master cognitive academic proficiency skills (CALP), which include writing.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the high stakes nature of writing well in English, there is little composition research and literature to support the growing numbers of secondary school English language learners in achieving these skills, despite the fact that many newcomers and incoming English language learners are entering the U.S. school system as adolescents. Even studies in bilingual education have tended to sidestep the question of writing, in favor of reading and cultural negotiations. Despite the demographic trends, there is very little known about school-age immigrant and refugee students with respect to their academic writing abilities, approaches, and experiences. Without this information, teachers and schools cannot prepare U.S. resident second language students for the challenges of a higher education system and an economy, which increasingly places more value on the written word.

For ELL students, these high stakes are further complicated by the complex realities of their unique linguistic and cultural experiences, and how those experiences are defined by their peers and teachers in their day-to-day school encounters. Like many high school students, U.S. resident second language students spend much of their adolescence negotiating, discovering and forming their identities on many levels. These various

---

<sup>3</sup> As Suzanne Peregoy and Owen Boyle, authors of *Reading, Writing and Learning in ESL*, explain: “Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills needed for social conversation purposes, whereas Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to formal language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, used for academic learning. Research shows that students may demonstrate basic social competence in a second language within six months to two years after arrival in a new country. In other words, they can speak English well enough to interact with their peers, talk on the telephone, and negotiate meanings with adults. However, the ability to demonstrate academic competence in the new language orally and in writing at a level commensurate with that of their native-speaking peers may take five years or more” (53-54).

identities and negotiations among them are always in flux and fluid, depending on the social dynamics of a given interaction or situation. But for second language students, their identity as “ESL” slices through the various other layers of identity that play a role in their lives. As Shondel Nero has theorized in her work on ESL students and identity, “The dynamic construction of identity [...] is often at odds with the tendency in educational institutions to ascribe fixed ethno-linguistic identities to students” (195). These ascribed identities often follow ELL students throughout their high school years, whether or not they have exited from formal “ESL” programs or classrooms. As I establish in this dissertation, students’ identities as “English language learners,” and the instructional consequences of that identity, play a role in how the second language students understand academic writing. Given the high stakes nature of writing, these students’ ability to write well in English can affect their level of academic advancement. The designation of an “ESL identity” has interesting implications for the ways in which students approach their writing, particularly in the development of academic literacy.

In my earlier research on “ESL identity” and first-year college composition students, I often saw the contradictory nature of what it meant to speak “English-as-a-second-language.” In that project, some of my student participants saw their status as “second language speakers” as a valuable commodity. They viewed their survival in a new language, and their ability to excel in that new language as a badge of honor. As one student in the study wrote,

I try to preserve my Russian heritage and at the same time keep my American heritage...I have come a long way in terms of adjusting to this society... [understanding] how things work here [...] this experience have made me more literate in life itself and will make the future a richer place. (Ortmeier-Hooper 21)

But this same student, who spoke so optimistically about his bicultural Russian-American future, noted that when he came to the United States as a teenager, he often felt torn apart. In his literacy narrative for his composition course, he shared that feeling, writing: “Just imagine tearing your whole existing life into bits and pieces, and selling off 50% of it, packing 20% of it, and leaving behind the remaining 30%... It’s like a giant part of me just ripped away, you know? (Ortmeier-Hooper 21).

Another student in the study, Jane, expressed pure disdain for her years in high school, commenting that she hated being “outed” as an ESL student (Ortmeier-Hooper 26). As she explained,

I didn’t like ESL...I didn’t like how she [the ESL teacher] made it seem like it [ESL] was your only identity. Like my comparison with homosexuality. Like I think they try to make that [ESL identity] apparent to other people. And maybe some people don’t feel like that’s who they are as a whole person. Like it’s a part of them, but it is not the most important. (Ortmeier-Hooper 27)

As I read through the transcripts of those initial case studies, I began to see how many of those attitudes and perceptions of “ESL” began to formulate during the students’ high school years.

Even those students that had long exited formal “ESL” programs still struggled with issues of identity and how that identity manifested itself on the written page. It was as if the students still remained on the margins, remained “the-kids-in-the-basement,” in their own minds. I began to consider more closely the connection between that sense of an “ESL identity” and students’ approaches to academic writing during the high school years. I wondered about the kinds of writing instruction that were available to them, the ways that students might be positioned in their schools as a result of their “second language” status, and the kinds of choices they made as writers in negotiating home

cultures and school cultures. I also wondered about the students that weren't in my college-level study—those students that never made it to college in the first place. How might writing have served as a gatekeeper, keeping some adolescent second language students from ever reaching the college campus or the composition classroom in the first place? The findings of my earlier study raised new questions for me as a researcher and teacher, questions that guided back to the source, the high school setting, in search of answers.

In this chapter, I begin to lay the groundwork for this study on second language writers in U.S. high schools through a review of the literature. I begin by complicating the definition of academic literacy and examining the research that has been done on the development of academic literacy in composition studies. I argue that the secondary schools often provide students with their first window into the world of academic literacy, and that they often receive their first glance into academic expectations of higher education while in the high school setting. I then explore the relevant literature on second language writers in the high school setting. For second language writers, this first window to academic literacy determines (in part) their ability to access higher education and the college composition classroom. But composition studies has rarely considered this window into academic literacy as it is seen by adolescent second language students. Therefore, my goal in this chapter is to open the window on academic literacy a little wider.

**Academic Literacy: Stretching the term**

*“Academic literacy is a powerful learning tool, a key element in academic achievement, and is vital to one’s becoming a member of any educational discourse community.”*

– Youngjoo Yi (57)

Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack in their edited collection, *Negotiating Academic Literacies*, note that the common-held definition of “academic literacy” in composition studies is “denoted as the ability to read and write *college-level* texts” (ix, my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> Zamel and Spack’s collection, which features experts in both composition and second language writing, strives to complicate that definition by pointing to “multiple approaches to literacy.” But the collection still reflects an emphasis on “college-level” texts and contexts. They are not alone. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Anne Herrington, among others, have tended to focus their studies on academic literacies on college-level students and college-level texts. Studies on the development of academic literacies have historically examined the “challenges” of students new to the expectations of college. For example, the genesis of Basic Writing studies was fueled by Open Admissions policies set into place at colleges and universities like CUNY in the 1970s. These policies

---

<sup>4</sup> In educational research on K-12 contexts, the definition of academic literacy tends to be broader than it is in composition studies. For example, Jim Cummins, the noted second language/bilingual educational specialist, has described academic language tasks as those tasks that “typically require high levels of cognitive involvement for successful completion” (68). In his book, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society, Second Edition*, Cummins goes on to explain the progressive nature of those academic language tasks as students move through the grades, saying: “As students progress through the grades, they are increasingly required to manipulate language in cognitively demanding and context-reduced situations that differ significantly from everyday conversational interactions. In writing, for example, they must learn to continue to produce language without the prompting that comes from a conversation partner, and they must plan large units of discourse, and organize them coherently, rather than planning only what will be said next” (68). His definition of academic language tasks provides a useful frame for reconsidering our definition of academic literacy in composition studies. As a compositionist, I would take exception to Cummins’s idea that academic writing is a “context-reduced situation.” In contrast, I would suggest that the context is always present in academic writing, but that students need to be given the tools and strategies, i.e. rhetorical analysis, to be able to identify that context.

placed “underprepared students” or basic writers into the college composition classrooms with teacher often unprepared to teach them. Studies by Mina Shaughnessy, among others, attempted to understand these students’ struggles with college-level texts and writing, but they also led to a perspective that the first-year college students were complete newcomers to academic literacy.<sup>5</sup> David Bartholomae, in “Inventing the University,” noted that first-year college students, particularly basic writers, often struggle with academic discourse. Bartholomae contended that,

students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were members of the academy [...] they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, the requirements of convention, and the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. (512)

But the learning of the “our” language often starts earlier. As Joseph Harris noted in *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966*, academic literacy is not “wholly foreign” to students; they have 12 years of schooling before they even reach college (99). Students are introduced to the some conventions of academic literacy well before they reach the college campus. I argue that the development of academic literacy begins earlier and becomes a more intensive expectation from teachers during the high school years.

High schools often work in a model that aims to prepare students for academia, regardless of the students’ intentions after graduation. Indeed, in today’s environment, college and university are often painted as the only option for students after their high school diploma. High school students are often beginning to learn the language of the academia. Unlike elementary and middle schools, the high school model moves closer to

---

<sup>5</sup> In fact, many of the studies on basic writers have often faulted secondary schools, both the teachers and the institutions, for failing these students in the first place. As Shaughnessy wrote in 1977, “By the time he reaches college, the BW student both resents and resists his vulnerability as writer... Writing puts him on the line and he doesn’t want to be there” (7).

mimicking the college system of disciplines and departments. And the curriculum often reflects the goals of college-educated teachers who teach to prepare their students for the next rung of the academic ladder. This is particularly true of English departments, where assignments like the five-paragraph essay, timed writing tests, “great books,” and literary analysis are often on the classroom agenda, attempting to imitate the college setting.<sup>6</sup> One main difference between the two educational environments may be that high school students are generalists. In most U.S. high school, students do not “specialize” into majors and particular disciplines. Nevertheless, the literacy instruction that students receive in high school is often based upon the academic conventions, expectations, and measurements put forth by colleges and universities.

An interest in adolescent writing development is not necessarily a new idea in composition. Historically, composition studies has had an interest in the writing development of secondary school learners. In 1971, Janet Emig published *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, and asked, “If the context of [school-age] student writing—that is, community milieu, school, family—affects the composing process, in what ways does it do and why? What are the resources that students bring to the act of writing?” (1). Four years later, in 1975, James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen published the landmark study, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. The project, based in Great Britain, was one of the first large scale research projects to examine the writing development and strategies

---

<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that many college English teachers have tried to move away from five-paragraph essays and the “great books” approach to literature. But the English curriculum is often guided, albeit slowly, by the trends at the college level. For example, the English curriculum at most high schools still includes surveys of American and British literature, in an attempt to meet college expectations of what “well-read” high school seniors should have read upon reaching college.



of adolescents in secondary schools. As Britton et. al. commented at the time, “The strategies a writer uses must be the outcome of a series of interlocking choices that arise from the context within which he writes and the resources of experience, linguistic and non-linguistic, that he brings to the occasion” (9).

Thirty years later, the questions and findings postulated by Emig and Britton et. al. still resonate in the field of composition, but the attention of many compositionists has turned elsewhere—cultural studies, digital media, first-year composition, advanced composition, technical and professional writing, and more. Although there are certainly areas where high school writing intersects with these research areas, high school is not a place where many compositionists do research. Strikingly, thirty years ago, Emig wrote in her literature review that “most pieces of empirical research on the adolescent writer focus upon the product(s) rather than upon the process(es) of their writing...Of the 504 studies written before 1963 that are cited in the bibliography of *Research in Written Composition*, only two deal even indirectly with the process of writing among adolescents” (13). As a point of comparison, the 2005-2006 International MLA Bibliography<sup>7</sup> list only two published studies on adolescents and writing, one of which focuses on the interaction between university writing center tutors and high school writers.

Although the work of Emig and Britton ushered in an interest in composition that spanned across grades levels (including the works of Nancie Atwell, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and James Moffett among others), recent research on school-age students has not been the domain of composition. There are some exceptions, including work by

---

<sup>7</sup> At the end of 1999, the Conference on College Composition and Communication Bibliography joined with the MLA Bibliography for the annual list of publications in the field of composition and rhetoric.

Anne Haas Dyson, Shirley Brice Heath, and Thomas Newkirk among others, but often these works are characterized as part of the field of literacy, not just composition.

Thomas S. Thompson's 2002 edited collection, *Teaching Writing in High School and College*, makes a concerted effort to bridge the gap between high school and college writing instruction and practice. But Thompson's collection is focused on the teachers and the differences that the teachers note as they move between the two settings of college and high school. A focus on high school students and their approaches to writing remains less visible in recent work of compositionists; this is despite the fact that at many conferences, compositionists often note that September's first-year composition students were June's high school seniors.

First-year composition students do not enter higher education from a vacuum. But much of what we know and have studied about high school in the field of composition has been personal, retrospective, or anecdotal. Often it has depended on college-age research participants' retrospective accounts of their high school experiences. Consider Ilona Leki's case study of Jan, a resident ESL college student, struggling on the margins of his academic classes, or Mark Roberge's study of ESL writers in first-year composition. In Leki's study, she writes extensively about Jan's high school experiences in the U.S., but much of the evidence provided is based on Jan's retrospective perception and his anecdotes. There are no other sources of data to triangulate with or to support his memories. Roberge's dissertation, titled "Institutional responses to immigrant college students: An ethnographic case study of a college composition, basic writing and English as a second language program," also relies strictly on the interpretative, anecdotal, and retrospective accounts of his college participants' high school experiences. They are not

alone. In composition, we value the evocative personal and literacy narratives like those by Mike Rose and Victor Villanueva. They provide us with powerful first-hand accounts of high school learning. These accounts certainly provide college compositionists with a provocative and fascinating look into the high school writing experience. Furthermore, a person's perception and memory of their high school experiences certainly helps to shape their approaches to literacy and education. But the stories and memoirs are always retrospective, shaped by the storytellers and their current vantage point of college. And like all memoirs, they are skewed by time and distance.

My earlier research into the experiences of student writers in first-year composition has made that apparent to me. In that study, the student participants often spoke with great conviction about their high school days, commenting that their experiences in those years affected their views of how college writing and how they made use of their identities as second language writers in college. Students in that study had a range of perspectives on "being ESL" from positive to ambivalent to disgust. One student commented on her fear of being "outed" as an ESL student during high school diversity celebrations. All of the students saw college as an opportunity to leave the institutional marker behind them. Throughout my work with those students, I was struck by the voices of the students and their talk of high school. Those conversations made me wonder about their real-time experiences while in the high school context. I began to see that there was more to those experiences than I could learn from recollections, and I felt that there was a need to dig deeper into the experiences of second language writers in U.S. high school contexts.

Consequently, this dissertation project aims to fill this gap in knowledge by focusing on the actual writing experiences of high school adolescents in the context of high school classrooms and corridors. Furthermore, this study aims to stretch our knowledge of high school writing, by looking at those experiences through the eyes and words of U.S. resident second language writers. In composition studies, there are few research studies that examine the academic writing experiences of high school students; they are even fewer that examine that first window into the world of academic literacy through the eyes of second language writers.

### **The Second Language Student in High School**

*A State shall approve evaluation measures for use under subsection (c) that are designed to assess – “(1) the progress of children in attaining English proficiency, including a child’s comprehension, speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English.”*

- No Child Left Behind Act, 115 STAT. 1702

### **Earlier Studies**

Landmark scholarship and theory on second language writing has traditionally focused on college-level academic literacy and has concentrated much of its focus on the international students studying at US colleges and universities, despite the demographic trends of U.S. public schools (Kapper). Indeed, the published research on second language writers in K-12 schools has tended to look to the outer edges of the spectrum: either examining the emergent literacy practices of children in the early years of elementary schools, including the work of Carol Edelsky, Sarah Hudelson, and Danling Fu, or focusing on the transitions of ESL writers as they move from their final year of high school into their first-year year of college, as in the work of Linda Harklau, Ilona Leki, and Gwen Gray Schwartz. Research by Carole Edelsky (1986) and Sarah Hudelson

(1989) remain some of the most in-depth studies published to date on the writing practices of young emergent ESL writers in the United States, but their work occurred in the 1980s. Only in recent years has there been a renewed interest in the writing needs of “early second language writers.” In 2002, the *Journal of Second Language Writing* (JSLW) published a special issue on early second language writing, in which Paul Kei Matsuda and Kevin De Pew explained that: “one of the fastest growing, yet traditionally under-represented areas of research in second language writing is early L2 writing—that is, the development of L2 literacy from the writer’s first encounter with a second language to the completion of high school” (262).<sup>8</sup> This special issue was an effort to open up early L2 writing as an area of inquiry so as to “provide a more comprehensive understanding of the life-long process of L2 literacy acquisition, thus contributing to the development of the more general theory of L2 writing” (264).

Part of this increasing interest in second language learners in elementary and secondary schools is indicative of a revitalized interest in the needs of U.S. resident ESL learners, sparked in part by the 1999 publication of Linda Harklau, Meryl Losey, and Kay Siegel’s *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition*. Harklau, Losey, and Siegel defined “Generation 1.5” students as those “immigrants who arrive in the United States as school-age children or adolescents, and share the characteristics of both first and second generation (4). These “Generation 1.5” students have become an increasing presence at colleges and universities throughout the United States, and there has been increasing interest in meeting the needs of these students on the part of mainstream compositionists

---

<sup>8</sup> In 2002, Matsuda and DePew, in their review of articles published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, found that only about 3% of the articles “dealt with L2 writers in secondary schools in any substantial way” (262).

and second language writing specialists, particularly in the areas of identification, placement, and instruction. As a result, there has been a call for more research into the literacy experiences of these “school-age” immigrants as they move through the U.S. educational system (Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer). The few studies on the writing practices of high school age students studying English in foreign school systems, including those by Pennington et. al; Tsui and Ng; and Kobayashi and Rinnert, do contribute to the knowledge of L2 writing among adolescents, but they do not reflect the particular socio-cultural and identity issues that surround the writing of U.S. resident ESL writers.

Earlier studies from the 1990s gave us some insight into the experiences of these writers in high schools. Linda Harklau showed us the levels of nuance in her longitudinal study of Gateview high school (1994), in which she compares the experiences of ESL students in mainstream classes and in their ESL classes. Harklau found that in the mainstream classes, the students experienced “... many writing activities [that] were limited to a single word or phrase, in the format of fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, and short answer exercises” (255). In contrast, Harklau found the ESL classroom provided a richer writing environment for students, with “rich and plentiful experiences with written output” (256). This contrast was in part due to the individual dedication and teaching philosophy of single ESL teacher, whose academic preparation included exposure to the Bay Area Writing Project, which encouraged teachers to use process and workshop approaches, to write for themselves, and to engage in research and teaching that places writing at the heart of the curriculum. As Harklau described, the ESL teacher valued

writing and “made a point of including extended composition projects in every ESL class” (256).

In many ways, Harklau’s findings paralleled the conclusions made by Danling Fu noted in her ethnographic study of a Laotian family and its high school-age students. Fu’s work revealed that the students were not getting the literacy experiences they needed, in part because of the label of “ESL.” Fu found that the students, identified principally as “ESL students,” were tracked into low-level classes, “bombarded” with worksheets, and never given the flexibility or the time to develop English literacy in any meaningful way (205). She noted that high school, unlike elementary or middle school, followed “an extremely prescribed curriculum” that did not allow room for the literacy needs of ESL learners (Fu 205). In addition, Fu made the connection that ESL students’ English writing and reading ability coincided with students’ classroom performance, their grades, and their ability to move out (or negotiate their way out) of lower level classes. Second language students that struggled with English literacy struggled in their overall academic achievement.

Fu and Harklau’s findings raised compelling questions about the kinds of literacy experiences second language students have in high school settings, but the findings are limited. Harklau’s study presents a remarkable ESL teacher that is in some ways at odds with the dominant perspective in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that historically has perpetuated a theory of SLA privileging oral communication over reading and writing. Harklau, in a later *Journal of Second Language Writing* article in 2002, argued “that scholarship in applied linguistics—particularly the subfield of classroom second language acquisition—has evolved in ways that implicitly privilege face-to-face

interaction over learning through written modalities” (“The role of writing” 330). The perception that L2 classroom instruction is synonymous with “spoken interaction” has, according to Harklau, “contributed to the neglect of literacy even in socioculturally oriented studies of second language classroom communication and learning” (334). The lack of such studies in SLA has also lead to many trained ESL teachers to privilege oral and aural comprehension over reading and writing skills in their classroom instruction, contending that the latter two of the “four skills” must come later in ESL students’ English language development. Indeed, Fu’s experiences at Riverside High School speak to the variability of ESL instruction and the intensity of the writing instruction that may or may not appear in ESL classrooms. It is also unclear how those teaching philosophies and expectations of writing may change as second language students move across high school classrooms, between various teachers, into other high school settings, and across grade levels.

Previous work by Elaine Tarone, Bruce Downing, Andrew Cohen, Susan Gillette, Robin Murie, and Beverly Dailey examined the writing skills of Asian-American ESL students across grade levels. In their cross-sectional study, they found that the writing skills of ESL students at the eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade were “significantly worse than those of university-level native speakers of English” (Tarone et. al. 164). Remarkably, there was “no significant difference in the writing abilities” of the students between the various grades. The students’ writing abilities remained lower throughout the cross-section and “basically unchanged over this 5-year span,” meaning that the writing ability that was achieved by the Asian-American ESL students in the eighth grade remained the same or higher than similar groups at grade 10, 12, and the first-year of



college, but their findings are limited by the cross-sectional nature of the study. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain the level of progress for these students. However, the exploratory findings of Tarone and her colleagues do coincide with the concerns of many state and national education policy makers that note that second language students do not seem to making as much progress as their native-English speaking peers in the arenas of reading and writing.

This national concern with the literacy and academic achievement of second language students continues to be reflected in federal and state educational policies that have put the literacy needs of English language learners on their agenda, specifically under the guise of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Although these earlier studies by Harklau, Fu, and Tarone et. al. contribute to our understanding of L2 adolescent writers, they were all conducted prior to the policies, testing mandates, and regulations of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. They were also conducted at a time when many states, like California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, still had bilingual education opportunities for English language learners; since then, bilingual education has been eradicated in many linguistically diverse school settings and English language learners have been pushed more quickly in to mainstream content area classrooms in an ill-advised attempt to speed up their learning of English. Clearly, the landscape has changed.

### **Studies since No Child Left Behind (NCLB)**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was signed into law in 2001. NCLB sought to overall the educational policies throughout the United States. The sweeping legislation put a great deal of its focus on setting standards of accountability on schools, teachers, and students. For its part, NCLB has increased the level of accountability that

K-12 schools must take for English language learners; in fact, it is some of the first educational legislation in years to acknowledge and speak at length about the growing number of second language students in U.S. schools and the gap of academic achievement that exists among them and their native-English speaking peers. In response, NCLB legislation has meant that many incoming ESL students are no longer be exempt from standardized testing, and they are tested for grade-level skills in math, science, literature, reading, and writing, regardless of their English language proficiency. NCLB has ushered in a new chapter of educational intervention that has, across the board, increased attention to curriculum standards and testing. As a result, writing instruction and literacy has once again taken a forefront in secondary school education, much like the 1970s when “Why Johnny Can’t Write?” found itself on the cover of *Newsweek*. It is noteworthy that NCTE launched the Writing Initiative campaign in 2003, while at the same time joining with TESOL (Teachers of English Speakers of Other Languages) to create programs to support the teaching of English language learners, noting that “the teaching of writing” would be “a special focus” of the new partnership (2). This NCTE-TESOL partnership is indicative of an increased responsibility that is being placed on mainstream language arts teachers and ESL teachers to increase their understanding and to enhance their teaching practices to meet the writing needs of second language learners. This increased responsibility is particularly felt by teachers at the secondary level, where preparing students for college, is often at the forefront of their teaching objectives. More recent studies on second language writers in high schools reflect that growing sense of awareness and concern.

Kerry Enright Villalva documented the writing experiences of Latino students at Cerro Vista High School, during a year-long Senior Exhibition writing project which was developed “by a group of committed teachers” in response to national and state level standards and achievement concerns for their students (34). Using an ecological framework in her research, Villalva found that the writing instruction at Cerro Vista was significantly influenced by “national and state forces—the macrosystem represented by the standards and accountability movements. This macrosystemic influence resulted in widespread standardization of writing instruction at Cerro Vista High School...articulation and support for these writing skills was standardized school-wide (40). The rubric developed to assess the Senior Exhibition was based on specific outcomes articulated in the state and national English Language Arts standards (40). Furthermore, as Villalva noted the stakes for ELLs was high, because all seniors were required to “successfully complete” the Exhibition in order to receive their high school diploma. For the Generation 1.5 students in Villalva’s study, the “standardization of writing instruction presented both opportunities and constraints” (41). Teachers at the school, particularly those in the English department, were invested in the curriculum changes and advocated for the Generation 1.5 students, helping them “perform at ‘competent’ level according to school-wide writing standards” (Villalva 50). Unfortunately, that willingness to help second language students reach the ‘competent’ standard’ also lead to lowered expectations and a narrow view of writing achievement. As Villalva noted, the level of “‘competence’ neglected advanced skills in argument, evidence, and global organization of their papers, instead prioritizing paragraph-level coherence and heuristics that were more appropriate for short essays”

(50). Despite the school noble intentions and reforms, “the unique strengths and challenges of second language writers were neglected,” and the second language writers, even those in mainstream English classes, were not challenged to meet the “advanced levels of academic writing” (Villalva 50).

Despite these concerns, Cerro Vista High School’s Senior Exhibition program remains innovative and somewhat rare in the high schools across the United States. Often students are left with even less scaffolded instruction and academic support. The study also does not recognize the larger social influences, the ecological frameworks that exist beyond school classrooms, and the issues of identity that can be a factor in the level of expectation that is placed up in second language writers in the classroom and school setting. Would these students have had higher expectations placed upon them if they had not been identified as second language writers? There is no sense if the Cerro Vista students’ identity as “ESL” or “Generation 1.5” students played a role in the “lowered expectations” and the exposure to more advanced genres and writing techniques. And since the Senior Exhibition did not consider ways to play to students’ strengths, there are still many unanswered questions about how outside literacies and social interactions may play a role in the development of those advanced writing skills.

Work on out-of-school literacies has been a growing concern in literacy and education literature. Shirley Brice Heath’s landmark study of the Roadville and Trackton communities and the affects of home literacy on school literacy remains a fundamental cornerstone for any study of school-age children and the development of literacy skills. Heath, in her more recent work, has look toward to affect of out-of-school literacies to examine the effects of after school, art-based activities and programs on students’ overall

literacy development and school achievement.<sup>9</sup> James Paul Gee has hypothesized that students' exposure to video games might provide educators with some insights into new kinds of literacy that are emerging in the technological age of IPODs and digital literacy. Anne Haas Dyson's examination of elementary-age students' references to pop culture in their school language and writing contributed to this trend. All of the studies strengthen our understanding that school-age children do not develop academic reading and writing skills in a classroom devoid of their outside world.

Most of these literacy studies have narrowly focused on the experiences of native-English speaking participants. In the field of second language writing, Youngjoo Yi researched the personal, bilingual writing of Korean-American students and argued that the "out-of-school literacy activities contribute to students' overall experiences of literacy and thus may have an impact on the development of their academic literacy skills" (59). Based on the students' out-of-school literacy practices that she witnessed, Yi's research lead her to conclude that for second language writers, "prior literacy experiences are vital to engaging in other literacy activities and involvement; in particular, previous literacy practices in one language can have an impact on literacy activities in another language" (68). For the purposes of my study, the work of Yi, Heath, Dyson, and other literacy scholars, has led me to think broadly about the kinds of influences and outside experiences that the students in my study bring into their academic writing. Throughout this project, I listened actively to the student participants as they shared pieces of their out-of-school literacy experiences, and I often found instances where those experiences, including writing music, playing video games, or an after-school job, influenced their

---

<sup>9</sup> See Shirley Brice Heath. "Three's Not a Crowd: Plans, Roles, and Focus in the Arts. Educational Researcher. 30.7(October 2001): 10-17.

academic writing approaches. As Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater once noted in her book, *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students*, “Academic literacies cannot be untied from a students’ overall literacy: the package comes complete” (xvi).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued for the broadening of composition’s perspectives on academic literacy, noting that high school often provides students their first window into academic writing and expectation. For second language writers, I contend that this first window into academic literacy is often clouded by their identity negotiations, as adolescents and as English language learners. Academic literacy is always inextricably tied to a writer’s own sense of identity in her academic and educational world, but that sense of identity is furthered complicated for second language writers by their distinct cultural and linguistic experiences. It is this connection between writing and identity that weaves its way throughout this dissertation.

In the next chapter, I take up the theoretical strand of this fabric, examining how compositionists have linked identity and writing in the past and what theories have been helpful in establishing those connections. I explore identity theories from the social sciences, including the work of Erving Goffman, Henri Tajfel, and John Turner, and identity theories from second language acquisition in order to build a foundational frame by which to analyze and discuss the findings of my research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **DEFINING IDENTITY: SETTING THE THEORETICAL FRAME**

In this chapter, I explore how composition studies in the past has theoretically approached the intersection between writing and identity and how the field of second language studies has understood issues of identity and language learning. Studies on the development of academic literacy have already made great strides in considering how college student writers negotiate and struggle with their academic identities in order to learn to write academically. But many questions on the links between identity and writing development remain unanswered, particularly when it comes to the setting of high school and the experiences of second language students.

This study begins to open up these questions, by examining how group dynamics, institutional labels, and learning a second language play a role in how adolescent second language writers approach to academic writing. To begin to frame that new territory more clearly, this chapter will examines how theories of identity have been employed in past studies of composition and second language acquisition. I begin by examining my own set concerns with the questions of “identity” and “self” that seem to dominate postmodern discussions of writing and writers. I then look at how compositionists have made links between questions of identity and writing in the past, specifically looking at the treatment of identity theories from the social sciences. In the final part of this chapter, I examine how the field of second language studies has viewed the connection between

identity and language acquisition in order to understand the unique circumstances of English language learners, like those in my study. I conclude the chapter by presenting the theoretical frames that I bring into this study.

### **Coming to Terms with Identity: My Own and Others**

The theories of identity are multiple—ranging from ethnic, cultural, sexual, gendered, racial, socio-economic, and so on. In our increasingly postmodern world, these identities mesh and collide, and the theories of identity that follow them have become increasingly complex and multi-layered. At the core of any question of “self” and “identity” in Composition Studies has been the debate on personal writing and the postmodern visions of socially constructed multiple selves and multiple identities. Although this dissertation does not take up the debate on personal writing, it is very much concerned with the multi-layered nature of identity, particularly the identity of second language writers.

I find myself caught between the postmodern and the modern, understanding the multi-dimensional, multiple, fluid nature of identity, but at the same time, feeling on a very personal level, that there is something like a “true self,” “a primary identity,” as Keith Gilyard once explained. It is tricky territory, no doubt. But as much as I agree that I am individual shaped by my surroundings and my social circumstances, I am also a humanist, who wants to believe that there is an “essential me,” that adds contour, nuance, and perhaps, control to that socially-constructed identity.

I struggle with that position knowing that language, family, class, race, and education have had a great deal to do with my sense of control, contour, and nuance. I am, after all, the daughter of immigrant parents, parents who spoke not a word of English when they arrived from broken homes and families, working as janitors and housekeepers



until something better came along. My mother completed an eighth grade education before going to the factory; my father was a master electrician, but that made little difference in a new world that rejected his credentials. Thirty five years later, they are proof of “the American dream” both in terms of socio-economic status and in terms of family. My sisters and I are testaments to their success and hard work—college-educated, Standard English speakers, intact family households, home owners, accountants, entrepreneurs, and soon-to-be Ph.D.s. I have been born and raised on this idea of “an American dream,” the tenements of hard , and “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps.”

But my education, my profession as a teacher, and my knowledge of the world, has complicated that vision. I have seen that opportunity and hard work are not automatic entry codes into a better life. Skin color, class, gender, ethnicity, and language all play a role. I have witnessed my former students rejected and waylaid by groups that would not allow them membership, watched them contend with the obstacles of broken homes and poverty, and observed their struggle to learn a new alphabet, new sounds, new rules, or hold a pencil. I have seen my former second language students plagued with doubt, fear, prejudice, and losing faith in their schools and themselves, often dropping out and dropping off the face of our academic screens.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, I have also seen these kinds of students at their best and brightest with a gleam in their eyes and an enthusiasm for learning and achievement. In considering issues of identity, I continue to

---

<sup>10</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the drop out rate for first-generation immigrant adolescents (children of the foreign-born) is 14.6%. That rate is even higher for Latino children, which have a 44.2%. ([http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/droppub\\_2001/Figs.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/droppub_2001/Figs.asp)) In discussions of second language writers, both in composition and second language writing, studies on college composition classrooms do not often recognize that many “Generation 1.5” and other U.S. resident ESL students never make it onto the college campus, let alone the composition classrooms that so often serve as our research sites in the respective fields.

struggle to understand what qualities and experiences make us who we are and how we understand ourselves.

For the purposes of this study, I do not intend to present an exhaustive treatment of identity theories, but instead I focus on the work of selected identity theorists whose work concentrates on the two specific areas of my research: social identity theory and second language acquisition. But I admit at the onset that my own theories of identity are a work in process. I struggle with these theories, noting their weaknesses and strengths, and always considering their connections to actual students and student writing. I am conflicted by the binary nature of identity theories, and our persistent push in composition to partake in binary visions of identity and “self:” placing social construction on one side and “true self” on another. I find myself agreeing with sentiments of Joseph Harris, who once wrote, “The culture does speak to us, and perhaps even through us, but its discourses and commonplaces are heard through and inflected by the voices of individuals” (45). The individuals in this study and their texts speak to the complicated nature of identity formation. They struggle in their own right to take up an academic voice, while at the same time, coping with the coming-of-age struggles for identity that so many adolescents encounter, trying to make sense of who they are and who they want to become. The question is how do writing and the learning of writing play a role in that struggle.

### **Making the Writing and Identity Connection in Composition Studies**

*Writing is one of the primary sites where scholarly identity is formed and displayed. Whether through papers written for coursework, for conferences or journals, or simply correspondence, scholars often form their impressions of their colleagues based on the written word.*

- Mike Rose (171)

In discussions on the development of academic literacy, compositionists from Bartholomae to Rose have long held the view that there is a connection between academic writing and the identity of the writer. Composition has believed that writing in academic settings, whether in moving across disciplines or even in the introductory phases of learning the conventions of academic writing requires students to try on a “scholarly identity” (Rose 171). The “social turn” in composition has made questions of identity and writing even more complex.

In her landmark essay, “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing,” Patricia Bizzell argued that writing was a social process, noting that “thinking and language can never occur free of a social context that conditions them (368). Before the social turn, writers and their writing were often depicted as singular, solitary, and not contingent on their social circumstances. Bizzell and others were arguing against earlier studies that attempted to view a writer’s writing process as strict cognitive process that could be divided from a writer’s social circumstances and experiences in order to provide some empirical clinical insight into the process. Bizzell, along with other compositionists like Bartholomae, contended that a strict cognitive model always positioned struggling writers in a deficit model, defining their problems as “thinking problems” rather than as problems with the rhetorical situation or the socio-economic circumstances that had influenced their past writing experiences.

Writing is always a social activity. It is always “embedded in social context” as Roz Ivanic noted in her seminal work on identity and writing (59). However, the divide between cognitive and social perspectives thread themselves through any study on the development of literacy, because such studies inherently struggle with an individual’s

own learning ability and style and the social circumstances under which that learning takes place. This is particularly true of this study, which examines the social dynamics of English language learners learning academic writing, but also notes the cognitive development of these students as they learn about writing. Deborah Brandt profoundly noted that: “If social and cognitive perspectives hope to come together, the text is the territory on which the détente must begin. What are needed are ways to talk about texts as they relate to the processes of composing but also as those processes constitute public acts in social contexts” (10-11). For student writers, academic writing is always shaped in some way by the social circumstances inside the classroom and also the social circumstances outside the classroom. And there is always a question of identity negotiation as students begin to learn new literacies and make sense of old ones.

### **Performance Theory**

Many compositionists have drawn upon the work of Erving Goffman and his theories on performance and social identity in order to explain the connections that can be made between student identity negotiation and their writing in the composition classroom. Goffman provided the social sciences with the metaphor of performance for individuals’ interactions in society. He noted that individuals often had “back-stage” moments that led to their decisions and actions in society.

Thomas Newkirk, in his work on the autobiographical writing of college students, noted that “...all forms of ‘self-expression,’ all of our ways of ‘being personal’ are forms of performance; in Goffman’s terms, they are all ‘a presentation of self’” (3). Newkirk found evidence of those identity negotiations in students’ written work, showing the student “engaged in a staged process of self-actualization” (22). Often, writing teachers

only see a single aspect of that performance and are perplexed by the “backstage” realities that often influence these students’ decisions in the classroom and on the written page.

Drawing upon Goffman’s theories, Roz Ivanic examined the academic identity formation of British student writers who were returning to higher education as “mature-age” students.<sup>11</sup> Through her research, Ivanic theorized that writing and identity have a two-fold relationship: (1) writing is a key to developing a certain sense of identity, and (2) writers often “perform” certain identities in their writing. She contended that every individual has a “socially-available” repertoire to draw upon in a given context; the writing that is produced in that given context is a textual manifestation of that repertoire (Ivanic 27). Ivanic’s project is particularly interesting, because she articulated “three ways of thinking about the identity of a person in the act of writing”: the autobiographical self, the discorsal self, and the self as writer. For the researcher, an examination of “the autobiographical self” focused on literacy and life-histories, in an attempt to learn about the “aspects of people’s lives that [lead] them to write in the way they do;” an examination of “the discorsal self” included textual analysis of the discorsal features of a given student text; and an examination of “the self as author” focused on how the student writers in her study “[established] authority in their texts” (Ivanic 24-27).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> In her seminal book, *Writing and Identity*, Ivanic finds the work of Goffman to be useful in building her framework for exploring the interconnection between academic writing and student identity. But her extensive and comprehensive literature review on identity and writing expands across a wide array of disciplines and discussions, and she notes that the theoretical aspects of her study are also influenced by language theorists like Halliday, discourse theorists like Norman Fairclough and M.M. Bakhtin, and literacy theorists like James Paul Gee.

<sup>12</sup> In her study, Ivanic includes a fourth aspect of writer identity that she terms “possibilities for self-hood” and which is more focused on discourse analysis (27). Ivanic herself distinguishes between the first three aspects of writer identity and the fourth one, noting that, “The [first] three aspects of writer identity [...] are all concerned with actual people writing actual texts” (27). I have purposefully chosen the first three

Ivanic's "three ways" have been heavily influential in the research design of my project, and I provide an extended treatment of them in chapter three, where I discuss my methodology and research design in greater detail. In her analysis of student texts and interview material, Ivanic found that the student participants in her study often struggled to reconcile their home and work literacies with the newfound literacy of academia, wanting to partake in both but feeling the constant tension and prejudice between the two cultures.

Similarly, compositionist Robert Brooke argued that the identity that students present on the page represents an ongoing negotiation with the social forces that are influencing them; it is often a struggle to define "who am I?" against the backdrop of peers, teachers, and other social influences. Brooke found that writing is a part of the development of a social identity for students. In his research on identity negotiation in writing workshops, Brooke noted that:

Young people need to define their own differences, find the groups from which they can gain support, and define emergent purposes for their work. The problem facing young people is a problem of defining how "I" will act in the society "I" live in—and secondarily, of defining whether or not some form of writing will aid in this process. (7)

In his work, Brooke defined the social identity in two parts: (1) the identity which is assigned to us by our environment and our social interaction and (2) the identity that we assign ourselves. Yet those identity roles can be accepted or resisted by the individual; they are dynamic (Brooke 17). Brooke found that matters of performance and identity are dynamic and never static, particularly within the context of classroom. It is this process of compliance and resistance that often comes forth in student writing. Brooke's definition

---

aspects of Ivanic's framework because they are closely related to my own research questions. I have chosen not to include the fourth aspect of Ivanic's theory here, because it goes beyond the scope of my study.

of social identity and his understanding of compliance and resistance to that identity have provided me with the overarching definition of social identity for this study.

Newkirk, Ivanic, and Brooke all conducted their research at the college level, but their studies raise interesting questions about the relevance of their findings to the context of the U.S. high school, a highly charged political and social arena, in which students are constantly negotiating their notions of identity. Anne Locke Davidson's study on the adolescent identity formation in secondary schools, found that race, ethnicity, gender, and school and classroom-level dynamics all affected the students' level of academic engagement. The constant and fluid movement from classroom to classroom was accompanied by a range of social and political negotiations that played a role in how students saw themselves in the academic setting. As Davidson explained, "For individuals, identity manifests itself in complex ways, its salience and meaning, shifting also with contextual meanings" (30). Like most high school students, the ninth graders in this study are students seeking to define themselves within the complex context of that high school environment, their teachers, and their peers. But for these immigrant ESL students, these difficult negotiations are further complicated by the complex realities of their unique linguistic and cultural experiences, and how those experiences are defined by their peers and teachers.

Goffman's theory provides a connection between identity and performance, and that connection to performance has been translated into the act of writing by compositionists, who see the paper and the written word as a stage for individual expression. For the purposes of my study, however, Goffman's theories do not take into account the power of group membership and institutional labels that often provide the

script for many English language learning adolescents. Within the high school context, a focus like Ivanic's on academic writing and "immediate social context" proves more difficult because it is difficult to separate the academic situation from other social influences. The high school classroom is not a wholly "academic" situation. It is a context where the social and academic often coalesce and collide, making it difficult to separate certain aspects of the social from an academic self. Goffman's theory, though useful in making the connection to writing, does not provide enough insight into the level of group dynamics that may affect an individual's sense of personal and social identity.

### **Social Identity Theory**

In other studies in composition, a few researchers and theorists have discussed the impact of social identity on writers and written communication, drawing implicitly or explicitly on the work of Henri Tajfel and John Turner, often attributed as the originators of Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory examines how relationships and memberships with groups affect an individual's sense of identity. Roz Ivanic provides only a cursory discussion on Tajfel and Turner in her study. Bruce Horner and John Trimbur discuss social identity at length in their 2002 *College Composition and Communication* article, "English Only and U.S. Composition," but they do not explicitly define social identity or describe the theoretical underpinnings that guide their discussion.

In his introduction titled "Composing Social Identity," Donald L. Rubin explores discourse level responses to social identity.<sup>13</sup> Rubin argues for a "socio-stylistic concept of identity," examining the links between style and social identity. Much like Ivanic, Rubin argues that, "written language reflects or conveys a writer's social identity, but it

---

<sup>13</sup> The introduction is part of Rubin's edited collection titled, *Composing Social Identity in Written Language* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995).



also constructs or instantiates it” (7). Much of Rubin’s discussion is based on discourse level analysis and issues of how individuals use style to align themselves with certain gender or ethnic groups. He suggests that through discourse level analysis, specifically by analyzing how a writer chooses “among stylistic variants,” researchers can identify how writers convey their social identity, both knowingly and unknowingly. Rubin never fully discloses the roots of his understanding of social identity theories, but his work, along with other authors in the collection, seems to be influenced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner.

In contrast, Gwen Gray Schwartz’s research on Vietnamese-American “cross-over students” in first-year college composition provides an insightful and extended discussion on Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory. She explains that “social identity theory is based on the premise that everyone wants to belong somewhere, and people choose to identify with social groups that will boost their self-esteem and perceived social status” (56-7). Schwartz uses social identity theory as an “umbrella theory” for her project on students’ academic identities and argues that social identity played a role in her student participants’ academic identities and notions of success. In many ways, Schwartz’s study has many parallels to my own work in this area. We are both looking at U.S. resident second language writers that are trying to move beyond “ESL” labels and cross-over into mainstream English classes.

Since my research builds heavily on the original theoretical frames provided by Tajfel and Turner, I will provide a more explicit treatment of Social Identity Theory here, in order to provide a working understanding of key terms and premises that lie at the heart of the theory.

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory originated in 1979 as a way to understand intergroup dynamics and provided insight into how people cope with social and organizational change. Since then, Social Identity Theory has become well established in the social sciences, particularly social psychology. The theory defined *social identity*, as "part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 63). Social categorization is an important aspect of Tajfel and Tajfel's theory; it is built on the idea that individuals makes sense or "order" of their social worlds by placing people around them into groups "in a manner that makes sense to the individual" (61).

Tajfel and Turner established three main components that aid an individual in building a sense of social identity: categorization, identification, and comparison. The following chart (Table 2.1) provides a detailed description of the three initial components, and also provides information on "self-categorization," a fourth component added by Turner in 1990s.

As the table shows, many of the components are interrelated. For example, the *comparison* component works in tandem with the *identification* component. In general, the four components of social identity theory act like a series of building blocks that we use first to make sense of others and then to make sense of ourselves in relation to those others. All of our ways of "making sense" of others and ourselves revolves around patterns of membership and grouping, and the sense of who fits where.

**Table 2.1 Tajfel and Turner's Components of Social Identity**

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION
1. <b>Categorization:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We categorize people in order to understand them.</li> <li>• <i>Categorization</i> refers to the “ordering of the social environment in terms of grouping of persons in a manner that makes sense to the individual” (Tajfel 61).</li> <li>• Typically, people are categorized into some sort of social group: religious, gender, race, occupation, etc.</li> <li>• We also can find out about ourselves by figuring out which categories we belong to and which we do not. Then we adapt our behavior according to the social norms of that group.</li> </ul>
2. <b>Identification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are two layers to the concept of identity: <i>social identity</i> and <i>personal identity</i>.</li> <li>• Social identity refers seeing ourselves as group members, while personal identity refers to how we see ourselves as unique individuals, echoing Robert Brooke's earlier definition. In some ways, the concept of “personal identity” mirrors what Keith Gilyard as called “the primary identity,” the part of ourselves that remains constant and true, despite the social pressures and environments that may influence our other identities.</li> </ul>
3. <b>Comparison</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We compare ourselves and our groups to other groups in order to evaluate ourselves. We ask ourselves: Do we fit? Do we not fit? How do we compare with those around us?</li> <li>• An individual's belief system about “the nature and structure of the relations between social groups in their society” effects how we compare ourselves and others (Tajfel and Turner 35). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A belief in “social mobility” assumes that society is essentially “flexible and permeable,” that through hard work, talent, and maybe luck, anything is possible, including moving into another, more desirable social group (Tajfel and Turner 35).</li> <li>- A belief in “social change” sees society as essentially “characterized by marked stratification,” which makes it extremely difficult to move from one social group to another (Tajfel and Turner 35).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 2.1 cont'd.

4. Self-categorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the early 1990s, Turner reevaluated and updated Social Identity Theory to include a <i>self-categorization</i> component as part of <i>identification</i>. He suggested that sometimes we see ourselves as unique individuals and at other times as members of a group, and that these are both equally valid expressions of self.</li> <li>• This additional component offers a “flexible change in self-perception” that implies a more fluid construct of identity, a moving in and in between out-of-group and individual identities (Turner, 1990).</li> </ul>
------------------------	---

The determining feature that accords the values to the groups and our access to them as individuals is strongly based on our own social belief systems. For individuals, who believe in a structure of “social mobility,” gaining membership in outside groups is always a possibility; for individuals, who believe in “social change,” gaining membership in outside groups is plagued by difficulty and challenge. It is striking that the spectrum of social belief systems set forth by Tajfel and Turner seems to mirror Composition’s own discussions and debates about social construction and social mobility.

The concepts, terms, and components of identity formation formed by Tajfel and Turner provide a useful way to discuss the findings of my research; however they are not without limitations. Much of the initial work by Tajfel and Turner was based on minimal group experiments in which individuals were placed in groups without any authentic reason or justification. As a result, “‘pure forms’ of these extremes are not often found in ‘real’ social situations,” but individuals often operate somewhere in between (and in conflict with) the two extremes (Tajfel and Turner).

In composition studies, Gwen Schwartz, though noting the usefulness of Tajfel and Turner, has also pointed to some of its other weaknesses. For example, social identity theory “is not concerned with institutional or formal social groups, such as the

composition classroom” (Schwartz 3). In addition, Turner and Tajfel do not consider how social identity and group membership affect learning and achievement. There is also no element of performance, i.e. writing, in Tajfel and Turner’s model. Furthermore, the problem with the social theories put forth by Tajfel and Turner, as well as Goffman, is that they are very general. They do not discuss the specifics of race, culture, gender, or sociocultural circumstances. They also do not address issues of linguistic identity and how learning a target language and culture is inherently caught up in relationships of power and access.

### **Second Language Acquisition and Identity**

*...an identity label such as ESOL student may seem self-evident; its meanings are in fact constantly renegotiated and reshaped by particular educators and students working in specific classrooms, institutions, and societies.*

- Linda Harklau (104)

In contrast to Goffman, Tajfel, and Turner, socio-cultural, ethnic, and cultural theories of identity are based on the assumption that identities are socially-constructed by outside forces and then rejected or accepted by the individual. These theories acknowledge that individuals are not the only ones to choose group membership; often group membership is placed upon individuals by outside sources of power and circumstance. Learning a new language is indicative of this kind of dynamic. How do learners approach the target language? What circumstances and motivations are driving them to learn the language? What is the level of support in learning that language? How are the learners received (and judged) by the target language-speaking population? In second language studies, research on linguistic identity has traditionally had a more critical perspective on identity and learning, focusing on concerns of power and access

that can help or hinder second language learners in their pursuit of the target language and culture.

Bonnie Norton, one of the leading scholars in second language studies, has long noted the important role of identity in acquiring a second language. As she argued, “the role of language [is both] *constitutive of* and *constituted by* a language learner’s identity” (Norton 5, my emphasis). The two, language and identity, are inextricably linked. Norton’s research on immigrant women learning English in Canada examined how issues of power and access dictated the way her participants learned English and how they perceived their identities as a result. Her research pointed to the fact that for second language learners, identity and language learning were inherently bound up in how the target language community receives the learners. Identity for second language learners “[had to be] understood in reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (Norton 5). As Norton noted the women in her study “[needed] access to Anglophone social networks in order to practice English in the wider community, but knowledge of English [was] a *a priori* condition of entry into these social networks” (17). As a result, Norton’s subjects were concerned about being “marginalized as immigrants” if they spoke too loudly or revealed their accented English (106). They were tentative in their daily interactions with native English speakers, especially they found that many members of the target language community were reluctant to engage in conversation with the newcomers. Norton surmised that the question of power, between those with English and those without, played a role in the amount of English language practice her participants had access to and the level of expertise they were able to achieve as a result.

Although Norton's research looks directly at speech, and her participants were adult learners, in a non-academic setting, I draw upon the concepts that Norton puts forth because there are interesting parallels to the writing practices and identity experiences of the students in my study and in past studies by Villalva and Fu. The parallels I see are that many second language students in U.S. high schools are not placed in college-preparatory classes, due to lack of English reading or writing proficiency, but often their placement in lower level classes means that they are not exposed to the kinds of academic writing practice (i.e. exposure to more advanced genres, like argument, longer writing assignments, or writing-to-learn experiences). That lack of exposure, in turn, hinders them from gaining access to college-preparatory classes in the future. As a result, these students are also denied access to the social opportunities and networks that are inherently part of those upper-level classes. Like the immigrant women in Norton's study, access to target language community influences their opportunities to practice and excel in the English. Without a chance to actively practice English academic writing, their skills may not advance.

Norton also concluded that identity among the English language learners in her study was both contradictory and dynamic. She observed that "identity [was] a site of struggle" for English language learners, remarking that her participants often made contradictory choices about English and their use of it. For example, one mother in her study wanted her daughter to learn English, but at the same time, she didn't want her daughter's knowledge of English to undermine their relationship. That sense of conflict exemplified a love-hate relationship with English, in which the participants understood the power of the English language to open doors and to establish their place in the

community but were always in conflict with their sense of status as immigrants and their pride in their home language and culture. But Norton also noted that that sense of conflict could change over time as well.

As Norton's participants became more confident in themselves, and more confident about their rights as Canadian citizens, they moved from seeing themselves as outsiders to seeing themselves as "multicultural citizen[s] of Canada" (129). Her participants' perception of their identities as outsider-immigrants shifted as they became more involved in their communities and more willing to claim "their right to speak" in the greater society. Norton concluded that, "Not only [were] such characteristics [of identity] socially constructed, but they change[d] over historical time and social space" (129). Norton's work informs me that the identities of English language learners are always in transition, ever-evolving and never static. They evolve as the learners become more confident in their abilities as English language users, but they also can shift with each new time, new space, and new social situation.

That sense of a shifting linguistic identity was examined by Yasuko Kanno. In her study, Kanno explored the experiences of four Japanese returnees (*kikokushijo*) who spent their adolescent years in North American high schools and then returned to Japan for university. Kanno considered "how adolescent ESL learners gradually evolve into bilingual and bicultural young adults and decide where to position themselves between multiple languages and cultures" (7). Drawing on the Lave and Wenger's concepts of "communities-of-practice," Kanno contended that L2 learners were an interesting set of newcomers to consider as they moved in a "new community of practice," (i.e. the target language community) because L2 learners were often kept "at the margins," never fully



gaining acceptance into the target community, despite the number of years in participation (Kanno 13). In her analysis of the young people's narratives of their experiences moving across language and cultures, Kanno found that,

Just as they mature in other areas, [her bilingual participants] also become better at being bilingual and bicultural: not only in the sense that becoming more proficient in two languages or learning more about culture, but also knowing what to do with the knowledge and abilities they have gained. They grow more skillful at striking a balance between the two worlds and become more confident about their hybrid identities. (134)

Initially the students in Kanno's study focused on a particular group and concerns about gaining access and membership. However, when students "felt secure" in the target language community, "it gave them a center around which to build their lives with a sense of stability." That centered led them to have more personal and academic success in their overall development. As the young men and women in Kanno's study went to college and developed a greater sense of confidence and perspective, they become savvier about how to use and present their identities as bilingual and bicultural individuals.

In some ways, Kanno's study offered a more optimistic perspective on the power dynamics than Norton put forth in her work. But Kanno's participants also were negotiating the target language and the issue of bilingualism in a more privileged set of circumstances than the immigrant women in Norton's study. And it is that sense of privilege and control over moving across borders that also separates Kanno's participants from my own. The students in my study are immigrants and refugees. They have come to stay in the target culture of the United States and learning the target language is very much about their livelihood and future.

It is that shift in participants' circumstances that also make me question Kanno's more general claims on the identity and second language learners. Kanno argues against a "commonsense view of identity" that "usually refers to labels, categories, and attributes, such as 'ESL.'"(9). Kanno acknowledges that these "labels" and "categories" are "important parts of our identities" but she questions the ability of such labels to answer the "Who am I?" question of identity that adolescents struggle to answer.

In principle, I agree with Kanno's sentiment; however, for immigrant students, learners of English and permanent residents of the U.S., the labels play a significant role in how they are perceived and constructed in their classroom experiences. My own research on U.S. resident second language writers in first-year composition led me to see how intricate issues of identity can manifest onto the written page of these writers (Ortmeier-Hooper, forthcoming). I found that students often come into college with a degree of ambivalence about the "ESL" label, avoiding writing topics that might differentiate them from fellow students and not always eager to embrace the cultural and linguistic diversity that their college instructors may value. Students also viewed the "label" as a signifier for special treatment, either avoiding it as a result or embracing it as a way to garner support (and good grades) from the instructor. Linda Harklau's 2000 study of U.S. resident ESL student transitioning from high school to U.S. college found that "the very same ESL students who had been considered the "good kids" in high school, the ones praised and admired by their teachers, subsequently came to be characterized as underachieving and difficult students in their college ESL classes" (104). Yuet-Sim Chiang and Mary Schmida had similar findings in their study of first-year bilingual, U.S-born college students, noting that the label "linguistic minority" often

hindered students because they were “expected [by teachers] to stumble over the English language” because it was assumed that English was not their native tongue” (93). The students in Chiang and Schmida’s study then internalized these teacher expectations and saw “themselves as incapable of owning the language” (93). The students in Harklau’s study often struggled with the same internalization of teachers’ expectations and categorizations. In these studies, such experiences often put the students at risk in terms of their academic advancement in their composition classes.

For her part, Harklau found that the institutional label of “ESOL student” became far more salient as immigrant L2 students were constructed by teachers, peers, and themselves in the respective settings of high school and college. As Harklau argued, “Even if sociocultural categories of culture and identity are viewed intrinsically unstable and heterogeneous and therefore problematic, it is important to account for the ubiquity of such categories and how they come to appear so stable, homogenous, and taken-for-granted in a given context.” (104).

### **Social identity, “ESL” and High School: Putting forth a theoretical frame**

The theories that I have explored in this chapter speak to the complexity of any study on identity, academic writing, and second language students. They have led me to the following theoretical perspectives that provide the lens by which to view these students’ experiences, texts, and social circumstances:

1. ***Identity is dynamic and fluid.*** I take the position that there is multi-dimensional nature of identity. Furthermore, individuals are bound to find points of resistance among these multiple dimensions, and as a result, there is a fluid, dynamic nature to an individual’s identity and the way he/she decides to present that identity in a

given social situation or literacy act. I believe that this is a particularly true in adolescence when young people are still trying to learn who they are and who they want to become.

2. ***There is mutual constitutive relationship between writing and identity.*** As Ivancic, Brooke and Newkirk all noted, writing can be an essential key to developing a sense of identity. As writers, we often become more self-aware and developed a better understanding of our values, our talents, and our desires through writing. In addition, writers often use the written page as a stage to “perform” their identities. Often writers use writing to establish authority, to build and establish coherence with groups, and to highlight their learning.
3. ***Social identity has two parts: (1) the identity which is given to us by others, and (2) the identity which we give ourselves.*** This definition of social identity, building on the definitions of Brooke, Tajfel and Turner, is at the core of the writing-identity connection that is discussed in this study. The questions that are explored in the study seek to understand the balancing act between the two parts of the social identity. When does “identity given by others” dominate the “identity we give ourselves”? And vice versa. Furthermore, this study also considers the effects of that balancing act on “ESL” students in high school, their learning of academic literacy, and their opportunities for academic advancement.
4. ***Individuals establish social identities and memberships in groups through a system of categorization, identification, and comparison.*** The terminology created by Tajfel and Turner to discuss social identity theory is used in my data analysis and findings chapters of this study. In an attempt to extend Social

Identity Theory, I will use these terms to discuss how students respond to social groups and categories—both formal and informal, to share how they define those groups and themselves in comparison to groups, and to evaluate how their sense of those groups and their concerns of membership impact their approaches to academic writing.

5. ***Beyond linguistic and ethnic identity, there is the concept of an “ESL Identity,” a concept that partakes of group membership concepts from Social Identity Theory and the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity theories of second language acquisition.*** Ultimately, social identity theories suggest that the individual has control over his/her agency in the group dynamic. But these studies fail to take into account the problem of institutional placements that create groups like “ESL” students. None of these theories accounts for institutional markings and groupings that are prevalent in school systems. According to Turner, group membership “is not something foreign that is tacked onto the person, it is a real, true, and vital part of the person.” But, for English language learners in U.S. public schools, the group of “ESL” is both false and true. It is false because it is a designated supplied by the educational institution in order to indicate special courses, support, etc. But it is also true because students are also really, truly second language learners, riding that bicultural, bilingual line. Building on the questions of an “ESL identity” raised by Linda Harklau and Shondel Nero, I contend that “ESL” is an educational label that also functions on some level as a social identity, identifying a social group within the school. At the same time,

knowing “English as a Second Language” functions as part of an individual’ personal identity, referring to a unique cultural and linguistic literacy history.

6. *In studying second language learners, particularly immigrant and refugees, issues of power and access add an additional dimension of complexity that must be considered in any study of social identity and writing.* This study, the participants, and the researcher do not reside in a clinical, sterile environment, free of bias, prejudice and controversy. In fact, this study occurs at a time when the United States is experiencing one of the largest demographic shifts in terms of immigration. As a result, the level of public scrutiny on immigrants, immigration policies, and educational policies for English language learners is an important critical backdrop to understand and consider in my discussion of the student participants experiences with academic writing and “ESL” identity.

It is with these theoretical frames, that I enter this research project and present my findings. In second language acquisition, the studies on identity have yet to fully consider the connection between writing and identity, particularly in terms of developing academic literacy. At the same time, composition studies has not yet considered the experiences of second language writers or the setting of secondary school in its studies of identity and writing. My goal in this dissertation research is to begin to fill this theoretical gap and to move toward a more complicated understanding of the interplay between second language acquisition, identity and writing.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

*For the last few years, the field of composition has been struggling to resolve a split between social and cognitive views of writing...If social and cognitive perspectives hope to come together, the text is the territory on which the détente must begin. What are needed are ways to talk about texts as they relate to the processes of composing but also as those processes constitute public acts in social contexts.*

- Deborah Brandt (10-11)

#### **Questions and the Search for Answers: Designing the Study**

This chapter describes the methodology, research design, community contexts, participants of this study, and the school contexts of this dissertation. Like all research projects, this project began with a series of questions, questions that stemmed from that initial conversation with Fanika that I shared in the introduction. As the project and my knowledge of the field progressed, those questions became more developed and layered.

The following research questions guided my design and approach:

1. How is the identity of an English Language Learner constructed in the school, both socially and academically? When does student stop being an “ELL,” or is an “ELL” label a permanent part of the student’s educational experience?”
2. What are the consequences of the “ELL identity” for students in terms of academic literacy development? What are the consequences of that identity, both intentional and unintentional, in terms of writing instruction, in terms of academic placement, and in terms of academic expectations? What factors and relationships, both in and outside of the high school, influence the ways in which second language students approach academic writing, both in terms of process and in terms of content?

3. How do students struggle with their identities as second language writers on the written page? In their academic writing, how do they resist those second language identities, how do they invoke them, and how do they seek to complicate them in ways that move beyond “ELL”?

My research questions determined my method of research and the ways in which I will present my findings. Early on, I knew that I needed a methodological approach that would enable me to bring student voices and experiences to the written page and to my readers. So much of what we generate in terms of composition and composition’s view of the high school classroom was based on anecdotal evidence, our own recollections of high school writing and those that we hear from students after they enter our college classrooms. But time has a way of skewing perspective, and we know so little of what it actually means to write in high school—what it feels like in that moment, in that cultural setting. So I wanted to go to the source. The goals of my research were to describe the experiences, approaches, and understanding of academic writing of high school second language writers and to examine how their social identities as ELL students were caught up in those writing experiences.

### **Case Study Method**

In both composition and second language writing, qualitative and case study research have been increasingly used to explore the writing experiences of students. The interdisciplinary nature of my research questions and theoretical framework led me to a methodology that fits with the case study research from the fields of first and second language education and writing. Case study method enabled me to build rapport with my participants, and to move away from thinking of them as single-sided research subjects. It provided me with an opportunity to follow my participants for a longer period of time, to



gain their trust, and to see more of their development throughout the year. Although the institution, its teachers and the cultural environment of the schools play an important role in this research study, the students remain the starting and the end point for this study. In the field of L2 writing, Christine Casanave has noted that “more in-depth case studies are needed of individual L2 writers[...] that examine writing processes from a sociopolitical perspective, “ she suggested that researchers need to examine language and literacy development but look at the “key actors” and “their relationships.” In particular, Casanave suggested examining: “How do particular actors, their relationships, and their culturally infused expectations about writing influence the ways that writing gets done? Do particular grading, assessment, or gatekeeping systems encourage or discourage imitative, collaborative, or exploratory processes by student and novice professional writers?” (93). In looking at the social identities of the students in this study and their place in the schools as “English Language Learners,” I sought to understand and view their experiences in light of the cultural, political, and social concerns raised by Casanave.

In presenting my case studies, I have borrowed from narrative approaches to literacy research. I was curious to learn how the students connected their various experiences and constructed their identities and writing practices. In other words, how did they tell the story of themselves as academic writers? As Casanave has written, “a narrative approach to the study of writing does not centrally concern textual analyses of narratives or how to students learn to write narratives and stories, but how researchers, teachers, and students deal with conflicts and find meaning in the events and actions that make up the activities of studying, teaching, and engaging in writing” (Casanave 17). I

mention the narrative component here, because it is an important given my research questions on how students' identity as "ELLs" affected their sense of self and their academic writing. As Yasuko Kanno explains, narrative approaches "are interested in what connections individuals make between separate events, how one experience leads to another (Dewey 1938, 1963), and what identities they express in the telling of their stories"(8). But in the case of this project, those narratives were often told over time and across various interviews, not in a single narrative act.

When I began the project, I had hoped that that my participants would be willing share their narratives and that the narratives would emerge as a cohesive stories of their experiences. And, indeed, sometimes they did. But often, the students would provide only abbreviated replies about their experiences, and only through my questions and the give-and-take of conversation would they go deeper, provide more details, and reflect more thoughtfully on those experiences. What emerged in the interview transcripts was then more conversational, not a tight, cohesive narrative that the participant provided confidently into the microphone. There were two reasons for this: one, the participants' were often unsure of their control of the English language and two, they were unsure of the goals of the research project and me, the researcher. In other words, they didn't know why I was asking certain questions to begin with, and they weren't sure if they had the right words in English to answer as fully as they may have done in their native language; as a result, many of their early responses were short and sweet, and the transcripts reveal a fair amount of follow-up questions on my part. The students' youth and inexperience may have played a role here too. They were new to the idea of a meta-cognitive and reflective understanding of why they did certain things in their writing or in their classes.

As a result, they didn't initially have the vocabulary to talk about those experiences fluidly. They also weren't sure what was interesting to me as the adult reader of their stories, and they were unaccustomed to having such an interested audience. As their confidence grew in the interview process and in their English, their responses began to take on a longer narrative structure.

I used field observations to complement the student interviews and student writing samples. As much as I respected my participants' views on their writing, writing instruction, and school culture, I wanted to be able to verify the reliability of their perspectives and to triangulate my data. To that end, I turned to other on-site observations to enrich the interview material and writing samples that I collected from my participants. I used participant observation, field notes, discussions with teachers, and artifacts from school culture to help place the participants' perspective within the larger scope of their experiences. This field work provided me with further questions about the participant's experiences, because I knew more about the actual settings that they encountered in their academic life and writing. My research design provided me with a large pool of data to examine, but also a better sense of how certain findings fit into larger issues of teacher qualifications, the purpose of the English/Language Arts curriculum, and the place of immigrant students in U.S. schools.

### **Community Context**

My research took place in a small city in the Northeast of the United States. Mill River has a population of over 100,000. The city, a former mill city, is a city in transition. Historically, this has been a city of mill workers and immigrant workers. Although many of the mills have closed down over the years, there is still opportunity for factory work

and unskilled labor in the region. Most recently a few of these firms have shut their doors to move to other nations or other parts of the United States for tax reasons or cheaper labor. Some high tech firms are moving into former mill buildings, but there are also many empty buildings. The city itself has both suburban areas and urban areas within the city limits. Downtown areas are less affluent, and like many urban areas there are issues with crime, homelessness, and poverty.

Over the past decade, Mill River has once again become a place of new immigrants and refugees. These days Mill River is indicative of many cities in some of the smaller Northeastern states with less diversified populations in becoming the place of settlement for new immigrants. These immigrants are a diverse group: some are refugees from the war-torn nations of Africa or Bosnia, some are economic and political refugees from Russia and Central America, and some are immigrants who arrived through the U.S. immigration's lottery system. Some are immigrants making secondary migrations from states further south, in search of better job opportunities and a quieter, safer way of life for their children. In Mill River, English-as-a-Second Language students make up approximately 10% of the school population, and city records indicate that there over 50 different home languages represented among its students.

### **The School Contexts**

The field work for the project took place at two high schools in Mill River: Mill River North and Mill River South. Although I provide a detailed description of these schools in Chapter 4, I will give a brief overview of the schools here.

Mill River North. Mill River North is an urban campus, surrounded by low-income housing and busy city streets. There are three cement buildings with a center

courtyard. The school uses a field on the outskirts of the city for its sports teams, and gym classes are held in a city park a few blocks from the main building. The main building is an original structure with red brick and large ornate windows, a testament to a time when just this one building was enough for the city's high school students.

The school population comes from the downtown city streets, as well as few suburban areas on the border of the district. The school demographics reflect a wide span of socio-economic situations, although the majority of families have lower to middle incomes, and there is a strong working class presence. Mill River North is known for its strong athletic program, accelerated classes, and diversity. It is the most diverse school in the district, with students representing a wide array of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Close to 15% of the student population speaks English-as-a-Second-Language, and over 30 languages are in this school alone. It has a large ELL program, with a number of ELL teachers, who teach both content-area courses like Civics and Math, as well English-language development classes. All five of my case study participants began their first-year of high school at Mill River North.

When I arrived at the site in October, the school faced pressures both in terms of physical space and in terms of the kinds of economical and political pressures that are often outside of the control of individual administrators and teachers. Six foot wire fences were visible throughout parts of the campus, and men in yellow construction helmets and Bobcats worked continuously, trying to finish the additions that were supposed to be completed in September. The additions were part of a long-fought battle to update a school whose original buildings had faulty heating systems and peeling paint on its ornate ceilings. The school was also feeling the pressure of the lack of a new teacher contract.

The teachers' union and the city had broken off communication. Teachers were on "work to rule" status: no work was taken home, no extra homework help was given after school, and no teacher entered the building before 7:15am. There was concern about a possible teacher strike, and the tension between teachers, union leaders, administrators and even students was palpable. No one wanted to discuss it, and everyone hoped that the stalemate would soon end. The "work-to-rule" and strike concerns also meant that most teachers were unwilling to meet with me or allow me into their classes until the crisis was resolved. By November, the stalemate came to an end, and a new union contract was reached. Teachers were visibly relieved, and I started seeing responses to my emails. The construction project was also making good progress, and the level of enthusiasm and pride in the school seemed to elevate as a result.

Mill River South. Mill River South is another high school in the Mill River school district. The high school includes students from the South side of the city and two surrounding towns. The surrounding towns are affluent communities, and as a result, Mill River South High School has a more suburban feel than Mill River North. Mill River South has its own expansive athletic fields and tennis courts. The building is newer and self-contained in a single building. Faculty members stand by exit doors, preventing students from leaving the building unsupervised. Visitors sign in upon entry, and in general, the campus seems to be less open than at Mill River North. The demographics of Mill River South are far less diverse than at North, and the school is known for its excellent academic program and record. One student in the study transferred to Mill River South during the course of the study, and the differences between Mill River South and Mill River North, in terms of demographics and academic programs, added new

dimensions to this study. These contrasts between the schools and my findings are articulated more fully in the chapters four and five.

### **Selecting Participants**

The five participants for the project were recruited through a summer ESL program where I served as a curriculum consultant. As curriculum consultant, I often observed the summer class, worked with the teacher, and accompanied the group on field trips. This pool of participants was particularly compelling because the program was for students that had been as “potentially college-bound” but also “demographically at risk” by their eighth grade ESL teachers who wrote recommendations on their behalf in order for them to gain acceptance into the program. Most of the students were from the Mill River school district, although they ended up attending a range of private and public high schools at the end of the summer. In general, students in this program reflected a range of English language proficiency levels, but they were all dedicated students, who were willing to give up their summer to attend the program. Some had been in the United States for as little as seven months, while others had been here for four years. They also came from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds, and they represented ten countries: Congo, Nigeria, Dominican Republic, Bosnia, Korea, El Salvador, Taiwan, Ukraine, Russia, and Somalia.

When I began to recruit students for the research study, I passed out an initial questionnaire to interested students in the summer program. The questionnaire asked them about their time in the US, the language spoken at home, the high school they would be attending in the fall, and the kinds of courses they would be taking, including the kinds of ELL classes (see Appendix A).

Since the students were under the age of 18, I also had to obtain the consent of their parents in order for the students to participate. Letters explaining the project and all consent forms were sent to parents in both English and their native languages. I also spoke one-on-one with interested parents and their children to clarify the project and to address any additional concerns they may have had. Student participants were also compensated with a small monetary stipend of sixty-five dollars each. The stipend was given to them in three installments: one at the first interview, then about midway through the study in December, and then at the last interview in June.

In selecting participants for the study, I was seeking students with a certain degree of oral English proficiency so that they would be able to actively participate in the interviews. The limitation of that decision meant that my student participants did not include the newest arrivals to the U.S., and my sampling did not include students who were beginning users of basic English oral communication skills. Five student participants volunteered to be part of the study, and all of them remained. I had originally hoped that I would have four participants for the study, but when five students returned the questionnaire and showed an eagerness to participate, I decided to proceed with five student participants. From past research experiences, I was aware that one or more participants may choose to drop out of the study, and I wanted to have large enough group in order for the study to survive this attrition. In the end, all five of the participants completed the study. In addition, when one student, Miguel transferred to another school in the district mid-year, he and I made the decision to continue working together, particularly in light of the differences that he was experiencing at the new school. In some ways, his move helped me to understand that a second language student's identity



might shift when the institutional context shifted, and furthermore, I began to see how much of a student's literacy development and social identity was dependent of the context and on what it meant to be "ELL" in an individual school.

**Table 3.1 Brief Summary of Case Study Participants**

Name <sup>14</sup>	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Languages spoken at home	Years in the US	Courses at HS	Proficiency level (end of 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Wisdom	Male	15	Nigeria	Gukana	4 yrs.	All main-stream	Intermediate/Advanced
Miguel	Male	15	Dominican Republic	Spanish	1 yr 10 mos.	ESL/ some main-stream	Limited (reading and writing) Competent (oral)
Therese	Female	14	Dominican Republic	Spanish	7 mos.	ESL/ some main-stream	Limited (oral, reading, writing)
Ken	Male	15	Taiwan	Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese	1 yr. 4 mos.	ESL/ some main-stream	Limited (oral, reading, writing)
Paul	Male	15	El Salvador	Spanish and English	2 yrs.	All main-stream	Intermediate/Advanced

Table 3.1 provides a brief summary of the participants. The five participants reflected a variety of language backgrounds, English language proficiency, years in the US, and immigrant status. Three of the participants would be enrolled in ELL classes throughout their first-year of high school, while the other two had been exited from ELL programs during middle school and would be in all mainstream classes. The participants

---

Pseudonyms are used for all student participants in this study. IRB approval for this study required that I preserve the anonymity of all the student participants, teachers, administrators, and schools. I have also tried to protect the identity of the city and its community, knowing full well that studies of this nature can often be used to target a district, its schools, and its teachers.

had residency in the U.S. ranging from seven months to four years, and they represent the following four countries: Nigeria, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Taiwan. One participant was female and the other four were male. For three of the five participants, this study documented their first experience in mainstream English and content-area classes. I provide more detailed portraits of each student toward the end of this chapter.

### **Data Collection**

In developing my plan for data collection in this study, the work of Roz Ivanic (1998) has been particularly influential. Ivanic suggested that there were “three ways” to consider a writer’s identity in connection to their writing: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, and self-as-author. As I worked on my research design, Ivanic’s prior research on these three kinds of writer identity provided a frame for my data collection and a way to think about the kinds of data that I would need to collect. Table 3.2 provides definitions of each of the writers’ identity as defined by Ivanic, along with the kinds of data that she suggests the researcher might consider. In particular, the three aspects of a writer’s identity led me to think about the kinds of questions I wanted to ask of my participants, the kinds of data I would collect outside of those interviews, and the ways in which I would approach the writing samples that the students provided to me. I found that using this strategy for data collection also provided me with compelling data for the questions of social identity that I was asking as well.

**Table 3.2 Ivanic's "Three Aspects of Writer Identity" and My Data Collection**

	<b>How is it defined?</b>	<b>What it looks like in terms of my data collection?</b>
<b>The Autobiographical Self</b>	The autobiographical self is the identity which people bring with them to any act of writing, shaped as it is by their prior social and discursal history" (Ivanic 24). As Ivanic has explained, researching the autobiographical self is an attempt to learn about the "aspects of people's lives that [lead] them to write in the way they do" (Ivanic 25).	I researched my participant's autobiographical self by asking my participants about their life-history and literacy backgrounds. I also examined their interests, their ideas and opinions, their sense of self-worth, and their literacy practices.
<b>The Discursal Self</b>	The discursal self is the self that the writer expresses, consciously or unconsciously, in a written text. Ivanic notes that this identity role is "constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relates to values, beliefs, and power relations in the social context in which they were written" (Ivanic 25).	I collected samples of student's academic writing from ELL, English and other disciplinary classes. As Ivanic has suggested, I examined students' texts "to discover language patterns of accommodation, resistance, ownership, and disownership.
<b>Self-as-Author</b>	The "self-as-author" is the identity where the writer establishes a sense of authority over a given topic, content, or experience. It provides a space to discover and discuss those moments, when the writer asserts his/her own authority over a given text and context, thereby noting that the writer is not simply "acted upon" but also changes and challenges the context in which he or she is writing.	In order to discover how students created and established a sense of authority in their academic writing, I used a combination of textual analysis and interviews with the students to learn about the rhetorical moves and social influences that they considered as they wrote for school.

Although I found myself moving away from Ivanic's theories over the course of the study, her work proved to be a valuable starting point for my inquiry. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the data that I collected throughout the study and some insights into the research process as a whole.

### **Interviews**

The data for the project was collected from August 2004 until July 2005. During that time, I met with participants biweekly to discuss their writing assignments and tasks,

their feelings about being identified as “ESL” learners, their perceptions of teachers and classrooms, their individual writing approaches, and their concerns and challenges. These interviews were conducted at either the public library or a university library. I purposefully interviewed students away from the high school because I thought it would increase their level of candor. I also did not want them to associate their participation in this project as another aspect of “school.” The public library also provided me with an opportunity to observe the students in another literacy-rich environment. Students who were familiar with the library spoke about their experiences with different books they had read and taken out here. Students unfamiliar with the library soon discovered it to be a place to read teen and sport magazines, adolescent novels, graphic novels, and to take out movies. There was a part of me that wanted to encourage them to be a part of a literacy-rich environment that extended beyond the high school.

During these interviews, I often began with a general set of questions about their progress in school. I asked about work load, upcoming assignments, and their general sense of “how was school going?” Although I generally approach each of our interviews with a set of questions (see Figure 3.1 “Six Writing Questions”), we always began with an informal discussion on school so that I could learn more of their take on the week’s events. These open-ended discussions often helped me to see salient details in their experiences that I could ask more about later. The open-ended discussions then lead to more pointed questions from me about their academic writing. Students were asked to share assignments, class notes, teacher handouts, and drafts of writing that they had done. I then would ask about their process for beginning an assignment, concerns or issues that arose in the midst of writing, number of drafts they wrote, places they thought needed

work, and places that they were particularly proud of the writing. When we first started meeting, students were often unsure of how to answer my questions. I also found that I needed to be fairly inventive and flexible in my questions. For example, often when I first met with students, they had already completed the writing assignments that they wished to discuss. It was difficult to get sense of what decisions and influences guided them as they composed in their study halls or at their bedroom desks. Realizing this, I created the “Six Writing Questions” questionnaires for students to fill out as they worked on a writing assignment and before they met with me. In some ways, it was a chance to put myself “next to them” as they wrote, and it helped the students develop a way of thinking about their own writing processes that later helped them to articulate those processes more fully in our interviews.

As I got to know each student, I asked specific questions about their individual writing, based on my own close reading of their work. When progress reports and report cards were issued, our discussion often turned to their perceptions of their grades or to teachers’ comments. During the course of conversations, I also asked about the other people in the lives that impacted their writing: friends, current teachers, past teachers, community members and family. We talked about where they turned for help in the face of certain assignments, strategies they employed, and how they interpreted teacher’s instructions and expectations. I also asked questions about how they felt they were identified within the school community and what role that played in their motivation and in their writing. During the interviews, I collected writing samples, graded assignments, report cards, and progress reports.

**Figure 3.1 Six Writing Questions****Six Writing Questions**

As you finish a writing assignment for your English/ESL class, please take a minute or two to write down some answers to the following questions. You can write your answers in your first language or just put down notes, and then we can talk about your thoughts in more detail at our next interview. Please write on the back if you run out of room. Thanks.

1. When was this assignment given to you? And did you do any thinking about this assignment before you actually starting writing? (Notes in class, just thinking as the teacher talked about it, talking to friends or classmates about it, etc.)
2. When did you begin the assignment (after dinner, during study hall, etc.) and how long did it take you to complete it? Did you finish it all at once or did you work on it in smaller pieces of time?
3. What do you think was the purpose of this assignment?
4. Did you think about an audience as you wrote? Who was that audience [friends, classmates, teacher, me (Christina)]?
5. Did you have any questions or challenging moments in working on this assignment? Tell me about them.
6. What do you think is the best part of what you have written (certain sentence, a phrase, using a new word, a paragraph, the way in which you wrote it, etc.)?

**Focus Groups**

In November 2004, I held a focus group interview of all participants. The goal of this discussion was to allow participants to talk across their experiences. I was curious to know what kinds of conversation would develop if students could hear one another

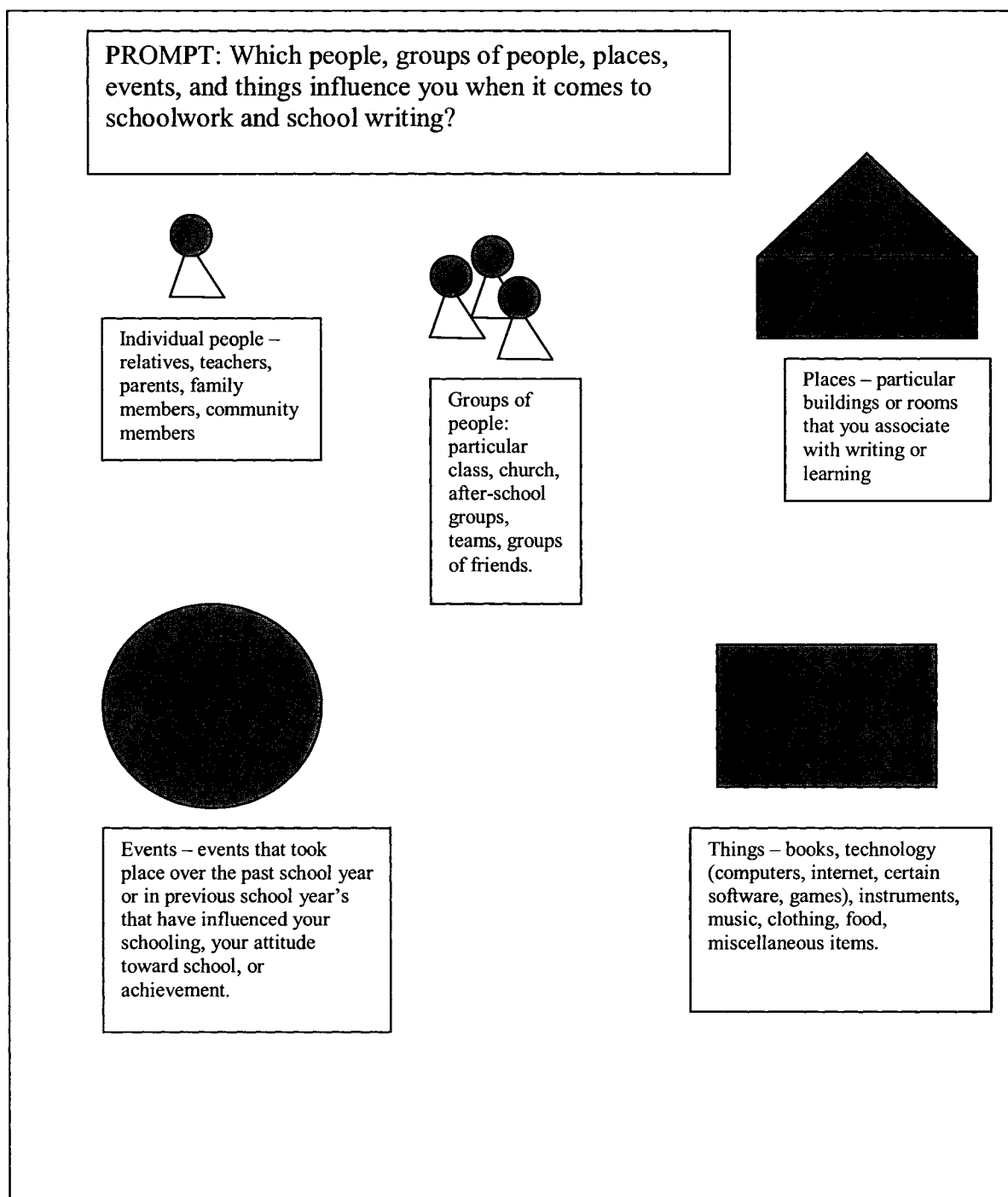
talking about their own experiences in the first few months of school. The idea for the focus group was built around my suspicion that my adolescent participants might be more willing to share their experiences if they knew others were having similar experiences. The focus group was asked a series of questions, and the responses were open-ended, which students often posing additional questions to one another across the course of the 1 ½ hour session. Although I attempted to hold another focus group session at the end of the school year, attempts to bring the students together at that point proved unsuccessful. At that point in time, many of the participants were more active in terms of social and work commitments.

### **Mapping Social Influences**

About seven months into the research project, I asked students to map out their social influences. The exercise was an opportunity for me to verify what I was seeing as their social influences, through my observations and interview data, against what students perceived as their social influences. I wanted to provide students with a visual way to map out those influences, because I was concerned that my previous attempts at these kinds of questions in interview had yielded confused looks and only partial or incomplete answers. I found that the question-and-answer format for these kinds of questions often had me leading the students in more ways that I wanted to. For example, when I asked a question, students would often reply that they needed an example. My example then became their answer. So to move away from that trend, I created the following mapping exercise. Students were given a large piece of poster paper, along with a series of visual icons (see Figure 3.2). Then students worked independently for about thirty minutes, identifying these influences by writing the name of the influence on a series of icons.

These were then assembled into a pile. Students were then given the larger poster paper,

**Figure 3.2 Social Influence Mapping Exercise**





and asked to write their name out in the middle of it. They were then instructed to paste the icons onto the paper, with those having the strongest influence being places closest to their names. This activity took an additional 20-30 minutes as students made decisions about where these influence fit in terms of importance and relevance. I then asked students about the map they had created and they explained the various elements of the map.

### **Onsite Fieldwork**

The biweekly interviews were later complemented (starting in November 2004) with on-site observations of participants' ESL classes and English classes. I conducted 3-4 observations of each participant, visiting the school biweekly until June 2005. During those observations, I collected three kinds of data samples: my own field notes, samples of assignments and handouts, and artifacts from the school culture. I documented the writing protocol of two participants as they composed an academic writing assignment, and I spoke informally with the participants' teachers, along with department chairs and counselors about the individual participants, the teaching of writing, and the place of immigrant students in the school environment. These discussions became part of my field notes and provided me with a sense of the school environment that my student participants engaged with.

### **Teacher Surveys**

Before I began my onsite observations of the participants in their school settings, I surveyed English teachers and ELL teachers at both schools about their writing instruction and their thoughts on student academic writing. The purpose of this

questionnaire was two-fold. First, I hoped to get a better sense of the kinds of writing instruction that existed in the schools, particularly in terms of philosophies that guided the teachers' respective practices and curriculum. I was also curious to see if I could draw some points of comparison between writing instruction in the ELL setting and in the English setting. Second, I wanted to know what questions or concerns that teachers had in regard to writing instruction and in particular the writing instruction of ELL students. I hoped that their responses might provide me with more guidance into the kinds of data and information that might be useful for teachers. To this end, I asked teacher three fairly open-ended questions in a written questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed and collected through the department chairs of the respective English and ELL departments. All questionnaires were completed anonymously, although I did ask teachers to identify the kinds of courses they taught, in terms of level and content. The questionnaire posed the following three questions:

1. How do you approach the teaching of writing? (Is there any philosophy or particular author(s) that guide your practice?)
2. What are the most important things that students should know about writing for academic purposes?
3. What concerns/questions do you have about how multilingual students approach writing for their classes?

### **Exit Interviews and Final Surveys**

In June, after the students had completed their final exams and their first year in high school, I met with each participant as part of an exit interview. The interview consisted of a lengthy survey in which I asked students about their writing experiences over the past year. The survey was broken down into four sections: Writing Skills, Feedback and Response, Writing Concepts, Genre (See Appendix B). In each category, a particular

skill, response, concept, or genre was listed and students were asked if they had heard of this item, where they had learned about this item (class, particular teacher, school or home), and how often they considered this item when they wrote.

The survey also included a number of open-ended general questions about their experiences as research participants, their sense of their English proficiency and writing improvements over the past year, and their goals for the year to come. Some students chose to write out their answers to these questions, and other decided to use an interview approach where I asked the questions and they answered as I recorded the session.

### **Data Analysis**

Since the interviews and the writing were the main staples of my data, they became the places where I holistically looked for recurring themes and issues. As I transcribed the audio-taped interviews, I used the Microsoft Word comment feature to mark salient moments in the conversation, to ask myself questions about those moments, or to note connections to other pieces in my data pile. I took notes from those comments, and then read through the students' writing samples and my field notes. As I worked through the data, themes of social identity, ESL students' positions in the schools, teacher and peer responses to their identities as "ELL students," disconnections with the writing instruction, became evident. This initial analysis led me to the frameworks and concerns that I articulated in chapters one and two.

As the importance of membership and social groups became more and more apparent to me, I turned to the work of Tajfel and Turner in social identity theory to begin to develop a terminology that would help me to discuss these social negotiations, along with my discussion on the students' development of academic writing skills. I began to

code the data, using Tajfel and Turner's concepts of identification, categorization, comparison, and self-categorization to reflect upon how the students were defined and defined themselves in their respective schools settings. I then looked at how the students' interpretations of those social identities played a role in their response to writing assignments, writing process, writing instruction, subject matter, invention, and revision. I triangulated that analysis with my discussions with teachers, my survey of teachers, my classroom observations, the students' writing samples, the students' social influence maps, and my field notes.

### **Two Concerns: Limits of the Method and Reincarnations**

The limit of the case study is that, as with most case studies, the findings that I share here can not be generalized across an entire landscape of immigrant adolescent writers. There are thousands of different high schools, millions of second language students, and a variety of cultural and demographic realities in the United States. There are a number of variables at play in each student's individual experience. Each student within these settings will have his or her own experiences and realities that affect his or her writing and academic achievement. My goal here is to study the social identity of my student participants and to look at consequences on their identities as English language learners in terms of their writing development. In the end, these case studies tease out the complexities of these issues by sharing the stories, insights, writings, and experiences of Therese, Miguel, Paul, Ken, and Wisdom so that we might add to our understanding of the complex interplay between identity and writing.

In the next chapter, I introduce Paul, Ken-wen, Miguel, Therese, and Wisdom, and as I do so, I am reminded of a quote by Bonnie Sunstein who wrote: "my informants,

people in their own right, living in their cultural spaces, enter my pages reincarnated” (177). These reincarnations are fraught with ethical considerations and an emotional obligation that I feel as a writer to “get it right.” Each of the students brought a very individual perspective and set of experiences into the classrooms and into his/her writing. In each of these portraits, I have tried to capture these students as real individuals with a sense of past, present, and future. In writing about their experiences and sharing their work, I feel an incredible sense of responsibility to tell their stories with accuracy and feeling—in part, because of their own generosity and honesty. Paul, Ken, Miguel, Therese, and Miguel do not exist in some sterile, clinical setting; they are real people—real teenagers with a breadth of knowledge, emotions, and understanding that infuse the pages of this project. Hopefully, as you get to know them and read their stories in the pages ahead, I will have done them justice and you, as the reader, will appreciate that sense of individuality and authenticity.

## CHAPTER IV

### INTRODUCING THE STUDENTS

*My informants, people in their own right, living in their cultural spaces, enter my pages reincarnated. My processed version of them exists somewhere between my mind, my field notes, my computer, and eventually my reader. I write of these people, but not necessarily for these people, use some of their words but not all of their words, understand a slice of their surroundings and histories but not the whole. I am everywhere and I am nowhere...As I give them life on them, I freeze them into time and space, depositing black words on a white paper for a reader none of us knows.*

- Bonnie Sunstein (177)

Since the remainder of this dissertation takes a more thematic approach, these portraits provide the reader with a chance to get to know the students and their backgrounds. In the chapters that follow, I provide more details about their individual experiences as writers and insights into their writing approaches.

#### Paul

*Paul slumps into his seat, a wooden chair in the adolescent book section of the local public library. When he entered the room, his backpack hung onto his back and shoulders, weighted down by the volume of books and notebooks inside. It now sits at the floor by his side, and he sits across from me, waiting. Of all my case study participants, Paul, with his narrow face and short-cropped black hair, seems the most reluctant participant and also the most ambitious student. (Field notes)*

Paul arrived in Mill River from El Salvador at the beginning of seventh grade. His family came to join an uncle who lived in the area. As Paul explained, “After 9-11, things changed in El Salvador. The economy got really bad. There were no jobs.” In the United States, both of his parents could find work, and Paul, along with his two older sisters and his younger brother could attend good schools and go to college.

In El Salvador, Paul attended a private, Catholic school, “one of the best schools in the country” (Paul). He studied Math, Language, Spanish, Social Studies, and religion. His family had to pay tuition for him to attend. The school also required uniforms, and Paul’s family had to pay for many of his books. The school was “a very strict one,” according to Paul, “and if you came late, you had to pay something or bring a broom and clean the windows or the bathroom.” Paul also reported that there was “lots more homework” than he had in the United States. He did well in school, receiving high marks in his classes, although he sometimes received lower marks for conduct. He said he never understood the low conduct scores.

As a child, Paul learned to read and write in Spanish, both from the school and his parents. As Paul explained his parents read to him “every other day.” His mother grew up in San Salvador and moved often, interrupting her schooling on many occasions. She was a dress designer by trade. His father had a “normal education,” according to Paul, and had worked in El Salvador as a graphic designer. His parents cared deeply about his success in school and so did Paul. He knew that doing well in school was a prerequisite for college, and he and his family wanted him to attend the best U.S. college he could.

Paul first arrived in the United States when he was 12 years old. Since he arrived in late spring, he did not attend school in the U.S. until the following September, and

according to him, he missed almost a full year of schooling due to the move, the transition, and the language barrier. He didn't speak much English when he entered the seventh grade in Mill River, where he took sheltered ELL classes on Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies.<sup>15</sup> He was placed in one mainstream class – Math, his favorite subject. When he moved to another side of town during eighth grade, he transferred to another middle school in the city. At the new school, he proudly told me that he took “all mainstream” classes. He was exited from the ELL program by the middle of eighth grade and was formally on “monitor” status as he entered high school.<sup>16</sup> He explained that his second middle school was a “newer school,” and he liked “being in classes with rest of the kids,” primarily native speakers of English. According to Paul, the mainstream classes were only “difficult in the beginning,” and he reported with pride that he did very well on all his progress reports and exams. In a recommendation for an accelerated summer school program, his eighth grade teacher wrote about him:

Paul is an excellent student who came to America two years ago with little to no English. He is a very hard worker and puts in extra time and effort. Paul is very motivated and demonstrates a strong desire to learn as much as he can as fast as he can.

---

<sup>15</sup> **Mainstream classes** are regular classrooms, where English learners learn alongside their native English-speaking peers. **Pull-out ESL programs**, according to Peregoy and Boyle, are programs where “English learners receive the majority of their instruction in regular classrooms, alongside their monolingual English-speaking peers. However, they are “pulled out” of the classroom on a regular basis to receive additional help from an ESL teacher or aide.” (24). In **magnet ESL programs**, “English learners are taught all subject matter using English as the language of instruction in a class taught by a teacher with special knowledge of second language development. The majority of students in such classes are non-native English speakers with various levels of English language proficiency” (Peregoy and Boyle 24). **Sheltered instruction**, which often can be a component of magnet and mainstream classrooms, includes “those programs, in which students are taught subject matter entirely in English. Subject matter instruction is organized to promote second language acquisition, while teaching cognitively demanding, grade-level-appropriate material. Special teaching techniques are used to help students understand English instruction even though they are still limited in English language proficiency” (Peregoy and Boyle 24).

<sup>16</sup> Students on **monitor**-status have been formally exited from ESL programs and curriculum, either by testing out of ESL or by opting out with parental consent. Students with monitor status may be typically eligible for some ESL support services like tutoring, but it is not mandatory. Guidance counselors or teachers will often monitor these students' performance in mainstream classes in case there is a need for extra help in the future.



When I met Paul, he was an active Boy Scout, working towards the rank of Eagle Scout and an avid reader of *Boys Life* magazine. One morning a week, he attended a teenage bible group at his church before coming to school. He was a shy, quiet student, often keeping to himself in the hallways of the school and in the classroom. He was very concerned about hanging out with the “wrong kids.” Paul was often critical of students that he saw “goofing around” in class, and he was easily frustrated with teachers that weren’t able to keep order in the classroom. He was eager to move into Honors level classes, where he hoped the work would be more challenging and the students more dedicated. During the school year, he became close friends with Wisdom, another participant in the study, whom Paul identified as a peer with similar academic goals. After school, they often played video games or basketball together.

As a writer and a reader, Paul was confident about his skills. His summer school teacher wrote in his final portfolio: “Paul’s writing skills are strong. His voice comes through in his writing. He organizes his thoughts well and has strong spelling and grammar skills as well. He needs to focus on developing detail in his descriptions.” As her comments indicate, Paul wrote with a good sense of grammatical structures and vocabulary. He had an understanding of how to write summaries and the basic four-paragraph essay. He knew that you had to have a topic sentence and supporting sentences and paragraphs. Paul wrote easily in English, composing quickly, rarely stopping, and making only a few his sentence-level errors. He rarely corrected his work or revised. He loved writing fiction. He loved “telling a good story,” usually an adventure or mysteries, with strong, action-driven plots, elaborate character descriptions, and character dialogue.

His ambition and disillusionment were standard fare during his first year of high school, where he finally thought he would be able to “strut his stuff” intellectually but instead found himself in lower-level ranked classes, where many students were often not paying attention, where the assignments bored him, and where paradoxically he still struggled with the assigned readings.

### Ken

*He plays like an angel. It was amazing. Like a private concert. I've never seen a student like him with so much talent.*

- Teacher at Ken's high school

In one of my initial observations of Mill River North high school, I ran into one of the ELL teachers, who told me of the day when Ken took out his flute and practiced in the empty hallways outside her classroom. Teachers began to pour out of empty classrooms, drawn to the music which floated up and down, bouncing off the hallway walls. She gushed in her praise; she was not alone. During the fall of his freshman year in high school, the music teacher took Ken and some peers to a local university for a review of their individual talents by the university's music faculty. The professors were overwhelmed by Ken's performance, noting that he had exceeded the talents of many of their own university-level music students. They were even more amazed that he was self-taught. In addition to the flute, he also played piano. In the summers, he played with local quartets and chamber music groups.

Ken arrived from Taiwan during eighth grade. Since his arrival in the United States, his family has been very transient, moving three times, within the city and along its outer limits, during the course of this study. Both of his parents worked at a local

restaurant, often late into the evenings, leaving Ken and his sister on their own. His mother, a secretary in Taiwan, could not find a similar job in the U.S. because she did not speak English very well. The restaurant job paid the rent, and the family's goal is to provide a good education for Ken and his sister. The family remained in contact, always through cell phones. After school, Ken usually headed home to work on homework. He was also an avid computer user and spent many afternoons emailing and IM-ing with his friends from Mill River and Taiwan.

In many ways, Ken came across as older than his years. His younger sister told me that he was "too serious," and that he always told her that she needed to worry more about the future. For his part, Ken was greatly concerned about getting into college and "succeeding in America." In his initial questionnaire, he wrote that being a part of the research project would probably be a good thing and help him get into college. He worried a great deal about the future and worked hard in school and with his music. He had dreams of attending Juilliard in New York City.

In terms of the high school social scene, though, Ken seemed very young. He was eager to please and watched his peers at every turn, trying to take note of what was cool and what was un-cool. He was very aware of who belonged and who didn't and what the various social groups were on the school campus. But Ken wasn't quite sure how he fit into that puzzle. He loved to chat and gossip, often telling me of the latest school incidents, who got in trouble when, along with his concerns about girls and the kids in band. He was candid and eager to give his opinion. Most of his middle school friends were younger than he was, and so he entered Mill River North more alone than the other participants. In the initial months of high school, he drew upon peers from the summer

program but soon he found that their interests and schedules were too scattered to remain close friends.

At almost 16 years old, Ken was the oldest of the five participants. He had a tremendous amount of energy and arrived at each of our interview sessions eager to begin. He took his assignment as a participant and an informant very seriously. He always came with writing, copies of assignments, and a willingness to share. As a writer, Ken was meticulous. He aimed for perfection in his English, but also in his style.

### **Miguel**

*Miguel is outgoing, polite, confident, and utterly charming. Early this year, when the bus route was not settled, he twice walked from his house on the other side of the city to the middle school, once in the rain.*

- Recommendation for summer bridge program written by Miguel's middle school ELL teacher

Rain or shine, Miguel loved school. For him, school historically has been a place of validation, caring teachers, and social activities. Miguel is tall with a mop of curly black hair and a continuous smile. He loved baseball, Manny Ramirez, and video games.

Miguel had been in the United States for only 18 months when the study began. His mother had lived here for a number of years before that, preparing for her children's arrival, finding steady work and becoming proficient in English. During that time, Miguel and his sister stayed behind in the Dominican Republic with his grandmother. His parents were divorced, and Miguel's father remained in the Dominican. Since the divorce, his father had remarried and has younger children with Miguel's stepmother. Miguel was fond of his father and the younger siblings, but he was fiercely loyal to his mother and

incredibly proud of her. They had a close relationship, and he respected her highly. She, in turn, wanted him to succeed in school, to stay out of trouble, and to take full advantage of the opportunities he and his younger sister had in the United States, both educationally and economically.

In the Dominican Republic, Miguel had studied English one period a week, and explained to me that he had learned how to say, “Hello,” “Goodbye,” “How are you?” and not much else. When he came to the U.S., he did not know how to read or write in English. In the D.R., he noted that he was an “okay” student that teachers liked and who did his homework.

In the U.S., his eighth grade teachers saw Miguel as charming, likable, and popular. He did his work, and although he did not often get the best grade, his work showed strong effort and dedication. Although he picked up oral English quickly and was able to express his thoughts, he continued to struggle with reading and writing in English. In his eighth grade English proficiency test, Miguel tested as a Non-Reader.<sup>17</sup> As a writer, he also struggled. On his writing assessment from the summer school bridge program, his summer school teacher commented, “Miguel copied the supporting details randomly into his writing, instead of using them to support his own thoughts.” Indeed, his skills in academic reading and writing were the weakest of all the student participants. In the study, Miguel was the student who struggled the most as the academic demand increased in high school.

---

<sup>17</sup> In his Idea Proficiency Test (IPT) test scores at the end of eighth grade, he scored as a Non-Reader. Some of the descriptors for Non-English reader are defined by the IPT include: “has an inadequate sight vocabulary, does not use details to detract meaning, fails to use inference to predict behavior, does not grasp the main idea, has difficulty interpreting meaning of a reading passage, has difficulty in reading to gain information, does not use the context of a reading passage to assist in reading unknown words” (61).

But despite his struggles with reading and writing, Miguel paid attention in class, tried to complete all his homework, and showed respect to his teachers. These were qualities that won him much praise from his teachers. He was also the most willing to please, and in some ways, the most passive of all the students, willing to accept whatever was given to him. While other students in the study expressed some resistance to their academic placements, questioned their teachers, and thought about inequities, Miguel was grateful, eager to please, and gracious. In some ways, he saw his role in school as survival. He wanted to be a “good boy,” to stay away from gangs, to be safe, and to stay in school. At home, he liked to work on home improvement projects with his uncles, including painting and electrical work. He thought he might become an electrician, but he also told me that he would like to go to college to learn about business. In the year following the study, Miguel, along with sister and mother, proudly became a U.S. citizen, pledging his allegiance in a State House ceremony.

Midway through the study, Miguel transferred to another high school in the district, Mill River South. His transfer provided me with an interesting opportunity to observe his identity as a second language writer in another school setting, one that had far fewer second language students. The cause of that transfer and the implications for Miguel’s academic literacy development provide compelling insights for this study.

### **Therese**

*Therese is dropped off at the library by her father. Her hair is pulled back into a tight pony tail, and she is wearing a conservatively-styled lavender tank top. It strikes me that she is more girl than woman in her appearance, and I wonder how much that will change in the course of this year. (Field notes, August 2004)*

When I met Therese, she was the shy girl in the summer bridge program, and I was surprised when she expressed an interest in the being part of the research project. She had moved from the Dominican Republic to the United States only seven months before the study began. In initial interviews, she was often quiet. She seemed uncomfortable and unsure of what to expect. Often she would answer my questions with one or two words. As time went on, she became more assertive—more sure of herself as a student and as a person—or perhaps more sure of her language, both Spanish and English, and her relationship with me.

Therese arrived from the Dominican Republic during the winter of eighth grade. Her eighth grade ELL teacher reported that Therese was a bright, intelligent, curious young lady, beautifully fluent and articulate in her native Spanish. When Therese first arrived in Mill River Middle School, she told her teacher that the “English words hurt her mouth.” She had difficulty moving her mouth, jaw and lips in ways to get the “American sounds” out. It all felt so awkward and stilted.

Therese described herself as a “good student” in her native Dominican Republic. Her parents valued education. Both of them had attended college in the Dominican. Her mother was an architect, and her father was a medical doctor. When they arrived in the United States, they had to start over. Her father’s medical credentials meant nothing here; he could not practice medicine in the United States.<sup>18</sup> To support the family, Therese’s father, who was also a talented mechanic, had become an assistant manager at a local garage in Mill River. At the time of the study, Therese’s mother was still seeking work, but she struggled with English, which made it difficult to find meaningful employment.

---

<sup>18</sup> In order to practice medicine in the U.S., Therese’s father would have had to re-enter medical school, take all the classes, and redo his residency, without any financial aid.

Therese, for her part, wants to be a lawyer...or an actress. She was still deciding, but she knew that she wanted to go to college in the United States. The promise of a strong college education was the main reason her family had come to the United States. In the Dominican, Therese had studied English only sparingly, during once a week classes of basic conversation. She also liked to have fun and often played with her friends after school.

Therese's older brother Isaac had two years older than her. Their relationship was contentious and full of rivalry. He was the "good one," she told me. He always did well in school, told her parents when he saw her breaking rules, and sided with her parents at every turn. When I asked if Isaac was a good influence, she immediately answered "no." However, his example was one that sets the bar for Therese and her parents, in terms of academics and conduct. His decisions and his academic success provided an example of what was possible, and he had a knowledge of the high school world, peers and social climates that Therese encountered on a daily basis. Her parents looked to Isaac for insight and truth, and they often positioned him as a role model for Therese and her younger brother. It was striking that it was through Isaac that Therese became involved in a school-to-work program, a program that I describe in chapter seven. The program played a strong part in her literacy development and identity roles during her first year of high school. Therese also had a younger brother, but like Isaac, he rarely entered in our conversations. He was in middle school still, and they did not seem close. When I asked Therese if she saw herself as a role model for her younger brother, she said no.

In later interviews, I was struck by the length of Therese's response and the confidence in her voice. She talked at length about her experiences as a student and a



writer with few interruptions or prompts from me, the researcher. Sometimes she could step outside herself and see with mature, adult-like eyes the actions of those around her, the realities of the future, and her own actions. Yet she readily admitted that although she could step into that observer role, she lived in her teenage reality, where she made decisions based on the moment, the impulse, her peers, and her own satisfaction. In our talks, she maneuvered between those two perspectives, at one moment, speaking with such maturity and insight about her life and her future, and at the next, confessing a crush and a broken curfew. There is a part of me that wants to write that she struggles between those two poles, but my sense is that her experiences were less of a individual struggle and more of the everyday reality of what it means to be an adolescent. The two poles coexisted in her, leaning towards one and then the other, depending on the situation at hand.

As the only female participant in the study, her experiences brought forth the dynamic of gender into the questions of identity and writing. Her experiences, as an adolescent girl and a Latina, both in terms of the social situations and in the classroom, added volumes to how gender fits into the discussion of identity and writing that I lay out in this dissertation. In many ways, her academic experiences were often more complicated by her social interactions than for the other male participants. As she became more socially active and began dating, the pressures to abandon her academic focus increased.

### Wisdom

*“Wisdom, you are a wonderful boy...You were wonderful to teach. In high school you will be a star. Portfolio: A+.”*

- 8th grade Language Arts teacher, final portfolio

*“Wisdom, you did it! We are so proud of you! You are a shining star, destined to accomplish amazing things.”*

- Note from Wisdom’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade basketball coach

Wisdom clearly leaves an impression in his wake. In our interviews and throughout the high school hallways, he wore an easy smile on his face. He always walked into a room with confidence in his stride and a twinkle in his eye. He loved the banter of a good conversation and is insightful, articulate, and thoughtful. He was extremely politically aware of issues in the larger world stage, but also of the politics that surrounded him on a daily basis. These qualities were not surprising, given his history.

Wisdom arrived in Mill River five years ago, a political refugee from Nigeria. He is the youngest of eleven children. In Nigeria, his father was a leader in their village, a small business owner, and a member of the Nigerian Twelve, a group of village leaders that lead an uprising against the Nigerian government in the 1990s. In Wisdom word’s, the conflict was a matter of “economics,” a struggle for the oil-rich province that

Wisdom’s family called home. As Wisdom explained,

the president of Nigeria and the government wanted to take the oil from the town and without exchange. Basically what we wanted them to do was just to pave the road and just make it to have a better place to live, more organized, and more developed. (pause). They just wanted to take the oil. We weren’t pleased with that, so we said no.

What ensued was a bloody civil uprising between the leaders of Wisdom’s village and Nigerian government officials. During the month-long conflict, Wisdom, his mother, and

some of his siblings escaped to the woods. Wisdom's father, one of the leaders in the village, stayed behind to defend the village. As Wisdom explained, "he was more in danger than most other people. They caught most of the leaders and what happened was that they hung him. They killed him. They hung him."

During the conflict, Wisdom's older brother rescued Wisdom from the woods, smuggling him and two other older siblings out of the village and across the border to a refugee camp in Benin. Wisdom's mother and seven other siblings were not able to make the journey. Today, they remain in Nigeria. At the time of this project, Wisdom had not seen his mother in over eight years and commented candidly that he doubted he would ever see her again.

By far, Wisdom has the most traumatic story of any of the participants. As Wisdom explained the story of his past to me, he was brief and there was a tone of resignation in his voice. There was a kind of shorthand in the tale itself; he had told this story many times. In our interviews, I respected his guardedness and his privacy and stayed clear of further questions on the war and his father. But his story remained an important backdrop to his determination, ambition, and sense of self. It was striking that at the end of the project, he chose the pseudonym "Wisdom" for himself, noting that it was the name of one the leaders in the village. Despite his guardedness, he was deeply proud of his heritage, his family, and the rich history and traditions of Nigeria.

His schooling in Nigeria began at a young age with preschool and kindergarten programs. The schools were public, but according to Wisdom, families had to pay for "everything"—textbooks, uniforms, exams, paper. Many families could not afford to

send their children to schools, and even more children who started in the schools were unable to finish due to financial constraints. Wisdom explains,

It was very hard to pay the school fees. The thing is that the political leaders that were there—they were greedy people. That is the problem I have, that there are some greedy people that are not ...that do not look to the future for the kids, for the next generation. They just look after themselves right now. And that was part of the problem. It was very hard for children to finish school because you had to pay for everything.

The difficulty of making those payments meant that most of Wisdom's siblings did not finish their education, although his parents worked hard to ensure that all of them received a primary school education and as many years of secondary school as possible.

When I met Wisdom, I wondered about his participation in this study. He did not fit the profile of an English language learner. In fact, as a Nigerian, English was his national language.<sup>19</sup> But throughout the country, over 50 languages are spoken in various villages and communities. In Wisdom's village alone, there were four languages aside from English that were spoken. He spoke Gukana with his family and considered it his first language. Although English was studied during his kindergarten and elementary school years, he reported that it was a mix of English and Gukana in the classroom. Although Gukana was his spoken language, he learned to read and write in English first. As he explained to me in our initial interview, "I could read in my language, but it is very hard, because I was never taught how to read and write. I could barely write my language." His brothers and sister, both in their mid-thirties, do write regularly in Gukana, pointing to a strong family literacy in the home language. But Wisdom's

---

<sup>19</sup> In his work on World Englishes, B.B. Kachru has defined Nigerian English as one of the Englishes in the Outer Circle. Englishes in the Inner Circle include countries like: Canada, United States, Great Britain, and Australia. The Outer Circle countries, such as Nigeria and India, are often places where English has historically arrived through colonization, but where English has taken on native and official status among the country's citizens to varying degrees. For a detailed discussion on Nigerian English, see A. Bamgbhose's "Standard Nigerian English: Issues of Identification" in B.B. Kachru's The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures, Second Edition (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992).

education, both in Gukana and English, was interrupted by the conflict in Nigeria, and for three years, he lived in a refugee camp in Benin with little to no education. According to Wisdom, the school in the refugee camp “was a covered tent. We went to school a little bit. It was not as more challenging. It was a lot of things put together to keep you busy.”

Of all the participants, Wisdom’s case complicates the notion of who is an “English Language Learner” in ways that writing teachers have yet to consider, which is the reason that I included him in the study. Unlike the other participants in this study, Wisdom felt a sense of ownership when it came to English, even though he readily admitted that Gukana was his first language, the one that dominated his literacy when he first arrived in the United States. He was also the student participant who has been in the U.S. the longest—five years at the start of this study.

When he arrived in Mill River, he was placed in a fifth-grade magnet ELL program at the elementary school with other second language learners from throughout the city. By the end of the year, he would be promoted to middle school and placed into a pull-out ELL program, an indication of his strides toward proficiency in English. By eighth grade, he was on “monitor-status,” and only saw his ELL teacher on rare occasions.

Wisdom was one of the most tenacious and resolute participants in this study. He was deeply concerned with doing well in school and was determined to go to college. He put tremendous amounts of pressure on himself to do well in school, reviewing each of his progress reports and grade sheets, meticulously scrutinizing his teachers’ comments. Although his brothers and sister did not track his every test score or grade report, he felt

that there is a level of expectation that has been placed on him by his family. As he explained,

They push me. They put so much pressure on me that it kills me sometimes. [...] It works like this. When I have homework, they don't tell me: "do your homework, do your homework." I know I have to do it. And if I don't do it, it's [pauses]. They already have their life. And I know that this is my opportunity, and if I screw it up it will be worse for me. And if I don't take any opportunity I have for granted, [pauses]. I just know it is something that I have to do for my future. I just suck it up and do it... There is a lot of pressure because they want me to get a better education, especially my mom would be very happy when I finish college and everything. She just wants me to be educated.

Wisdom saw himself as having the opportunity of a lifetime by being in the United States and he believed it was his obligation to his family, and especially to his father, to make the most of it.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced you to the students. Paul, Therese, Miguel, Ken, and Wisdom. All have their own individual backgrounds, interests, and talents that shape who they are and how they see themselves. They have rich and diverse stories of how they came to the United States and what they brought with them—both emotionally and physically. All of them share optimism for the future, an ambition to succeed, and an idea that success lies in education and hard work. All of them also share the sense that college is the gateway to that success, and all of them are in pursuit of gaining acceptance to a good college or university.

These students' identities as adolescents are all shaped by those factors, but they are also impressionable when it comes to their identities as students and individuals. Like many adolescents, their experiences in high school will play a large role in how they

identify themselves as students and adults in the future. In the chapter that follows, I examine how institutionalized identity categories, like academic tracking and “ELL” labels, within the high school work to shape these students’ identities as students, and I illustrate the consequences of those social identity categorizations for these students’ academic literacy development.

## CHAPTER V

### CORRIDORS AND CLASSROOMS: THE SHIFTING NATURE OF IDENTITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

*Individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem; they strive for a positive self-concept [...a] positive social identity.*

- Tajfel and Turner (40)

*Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us... in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions.*

- John Hughes, *The Breakfast Club*, 1985

On my way to the school library, I walk through the twisty corridors and crowded staircases of Mill River North High School, in and among the students of the school. The hallways have a rhythm—a pace that is always hurried, but friendly. Students and the occasional teacher rush by, stopping for only a second to relay a message, pass a note, or share a “high-5” or a quick hug, then they move onward like the tide. Walking the hallways of Mill River North, the diversity of the student population is obvious. It is not uncommon to see a diversity of skin tones here – white, black, beige, brown. Latin, White, Black, African, Asian. Accented English voices from Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, along with the occasional “shout-out” in Spanish or Vietnamese, join



the pulse of the hallway chatter. Students of color may be a minority here, but they are a definitive presence, a discernable population.

U.S. high schools, like Mill River North, are incredible social systems of varying strata and group labels. Some describe race and ethnicity. Other group labels identify peer groups, athletic teams, and social status. The “Socs” (Socials) and Greasers of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* are a perfect example. Although Hinton’s version of high school is somewhat dated in its labels, the book still resonates with many high school students because they recognize those kinds of peer systems and groupings in their current day experiences of high school. Given those social dynamics, high schools present an interesting opportunity to study the social identity of second language students, because it is a prime site for individual adolescents to experience the tension between family, self, school, and their peers. But peer groups are only one level of social identity that exists in high school; groups made up by the school institution constitute another level of social identity for students.

As I described in chapter two, society identity theory (S.I.T.) defines *social identity*, as an individual’s self-concept based “on his knowledge or his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 63). In this chapter, I explore how the second language students in this study both align (and are aligned) with academic social groups in their high schools. Specifically, I take up the four components of social identity theory — categorization, identification, comparison, and self-categorization— to describe how institutional categories that are used to classify students academically often become social categories that define students socially among their peers. Drawing on the work of

Anne Locke Davidson and her look at adolescent identity formation in high school, I make the argument that the institutional category of “English language learner,” like the categories created by “academic tracking,” creates a social group that second language students both identify themselves with or distance themselves from, depending on how positively or negatively the “ELL” social group is viewed in the greater social and academic context of the school.

In particular, I share how a high school’s categorization of students and student demographics can impact how students identify themselves and categorize their peer groups. I then take a closer look at how ELL students are positioned within the social microcosm of Mill River North High School. Through an examination of school artifacts, including school newspapers and programs of study, along with excerpts from interviews and writing sample of student participants, I argue that the negative construction of the “ELL category” influences how these second language students identify themselves and other second language learners in the schools and how they use systems of comparison to move themselves toward a more positive social category. These identity negotiations create what I have termed “a sliding scale of ELL identity” which accounts for the students’ fluid and often paradoxical shifts in their identities as second language students. At the end of the chapter, I share the identity shifting experiences of two student participants, Miguel and Wisdom. In Miguel’s case, I examine how his transfer to a new school positively reshapes his identity as English language learner in a school with a marginal ELL population. In Wisdom’s narrative, I examine his moves to re-categorize himself as an ELL learner in response to a conflict with his English teacher,

### **Categorization: High School Groups, Institutional Markers, and Identification**

*Social categorizations are conceived here as cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable an individual to undertake many forms of social action.[...] they also provide a system of orientation for self-reference: they create and define and individual's place in society.*

- Tajfel and Turner (40)

### **Student Groups and Tracking**

The concept of social identity put forth by Tajfel and Turner is built upon the idea that individuals make sense of their social worlds by organizing people around them into groups or categories. In high schools, this categorization of the social world takes place at the institutional level (by administrators, counselors, and teachers) and at the individual level (by individual students and peer groups).

At the institutional level, administrators, counselors and teachers place students into groups using a system of “tracking” or ability grouping. High schools in the United States for the most part still rely on “tracking” for placement and course creation. The system of tracking or “ability grouping” places students into courses by their “ability.” Students have very little control in how they are defined within that educational system. Testing, teachers’ recommendations, guidance counselors’ reports, parents’ intervention, and other placement procedures often decide where the students are placed and labeled within the system. Arguments for and against “ability grouping” abound throughout educational policy debates and education research and reform discussion, but from a social identity lens, these groupings provide an officially sanctioned order to the school, its students, and the levels of instruction that are offered. What is striking about the

system of tracking, however, is how those “official,” institutionalized groupings or categories transcend beyond the classroom and into the corridors, affecting how individual students and peer groups categorize the social identities of their peers. Jeannie Oakes, one of the leading researchers on academic tracking, has documented the influence of these “official group categories on students and their education experiences.

As Oakes described in her landmark book, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure*

*Inequality*:

However, it’s done, tracking, in essence, is sorting—a sorting of students that has certain predictable characteristics. First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average and so on.[...] Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others—both adults and their peers—in terms of these group types.[...] Fourth, on the basis of those sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently.(3)

As Oakes explained, the academic groups set by the administration have far-reaching implications for the way students experience school, instruction, and teachers.

Furthermore, tracking also plays an important role in how the student population sets up its own sense of peer categories and groups. These categories also worked to create and reinforce the identities of students within these groups. As Oakes notes, “a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, good. And those in low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average and—often when people are being less careful—dummies, sweatshops, and yahoos” (3). In short, the academic ability groups that administrators and school officials

describe in purely academic terms manifests itself among the student population as a set of behavioral and social norms that creates a system of social stratification and categories that are also defined by class, perceived intelligence, behavior, race, and culture.

The consequences of these social groupings on student identity were studied at length by Anne Locke Davidson in her book, *Making and Molding Identity in Schools*. Davidson discovered that systems of tracking leave an indelible mark in creating social groups and boundaries in secondary schools and in the way students identified themselves and other peers against that powerful backdrop. Davidson noted that, "The divisions generated by tracking produced a powerful set of meanings about the relative intelligence of individuals from different groups and their behavioral tendencies" (37). As one of the youths in Davidson's study commented, "Cause mostly the advanced kids are the real smart students and most of the people here, they ain't" (37). In the same discussion, another youth in the study replied: "Because, you know, how should I say this? They (students who are not in advanced classes] aren't as clean cut perhaps? You know, they might be ruffians, gang members maybe. There are barriers there, you know..." (37). Davidson observed that "youths not only noticed differential patterns of academic representation, but appear to draw conclusions about groups based on the patterns they observed" (37). Students in "less prestigious tracks" were defined as underachievers and "not college material." Davidson observed that the tracks also meant a certain degree of social stratification, limiting the amount of contact that the different social groups had with one another, leading to a greater sense of division among student peer groups and a greater sense of antagonism between those peer groups.

In short, the tracking of students helps to create social groups among the students. So being placed in a lower-track or higher-track class determines the peer group you are classified with, the students you get to know, the way other students view you, and how you identify yourself. Davidson's work showed however that these social group divisions that were created by school sanctioned tracking often led to antagonism between groups and isolation for those students that managed to transcend lower level tracks to advanced level classes. The tracking of students and the representations that students derived of their peers as a result of those categories also impacted their level of academic engagement.

### **Tracking and Categorization at Mill River North**

The system of tracking is heavily in place at Mill River North and at the other high school in the district. There are four levels in the system, described in the school's Program of Studies: Level 1 Fundamental, Level 2 Intermediate, Level 3 Accelerate, and Level 4 Honors (See Table 5.1). There are also a series of AP courses offered for juniors and seniors.

**Table 5.1 Academic Ability Grouping at Mill River North**

<b>Level 1- Fundamental</b>	<b>Level 2 - Intermediate</b>	<b>Level 3 - Accelerated</b>	<b>Level 4 - Honors</b>
Courses "designed to meet graduation requirements and to help students acquire fundamental skill for success after high school."	Courses "designed for college bound students, but will allow for greater deal of flexibility in career planning."	Course "designed for college bound students who have demonstrated previous academic success."	"Rigorous" courses designed "for those academically, talented college-bound student who skills have progressed beyond the mastery level."

Mill River North students are not placed in a single academic track, i.e. Level 1 courses for all their classes, but instead placed in different subject areas by track, i.e. Level 1 for Math, Level 2 for Social Studies, etc. In my discussions with teachers and guidance counselors from Mill River North, I learned that Levels 3 and 4 were commonly seen as college-track. Level 1 was sometimes regarded as a remedial track. Level 1 courses were often comprised of students classified as Special Education and/or English language learners.<sup>20</sup> Level 2 classes were the most difficult to categorize; they served as a catch-all for a wide variety of students, some with ambitions for college, some with high test scores but little motivation. All of the students in this study were tracked into Level 1 or Level 2 classes. Therese and Miguel were placed in Level 1 courses across the discipline. Ken, Wisdom, and Paul were all placed in Level 2 courses across the disciplines.

Middle school ELL teachers in the Mill River district explained to me that most second language students are placed in Level 1 or Level 2 classes when they registered for their first-year of high school. The middle school teachers noted that a few would move onto higher level courses, but often reaching that goal was difficult to achieve and plagued with obstacles. In my discussion with a guidance counselor at Mill River North, I learned that the concerns of the middle school teachers were not without merit. The guidance counselor informed me that moving up a level was based on teacher recommendation and must be signed off by the teacher. There were no other requirements for moving up or down, but the counselor emphasized that once students have been

---

<sup>20</sup> Special Education students often included those with severe ADHD, learning disabilities, reading issues, and emotional/behavioral disorders. Historically, there has been difficulties in some schools and districts where ELL students were administratively mistakenly diagnosed as "SPED" due to language concerns. As districts, guidance counselors, and teachers have become sensitive to these problems, the situation has improved. However, that improvement in the distinction between the two categories of student needs has also meant that it is often more difficult for ELL students with actual learning disabilities to be properly diagnosed and receive the SPED services that they may indeed need.

placed in a certain level class, they could not change that placement mid-semester—even if they were failing. There were serious repercussions for making an attempt at taking a higher-tracked class and not succeeding (i.e. failing grades and lowered grade point averages). Students were regularly warned about those repercussions when they inquired about moving up the academic tracks. The guidance counselor explained that she always makes a point of reminding students of the challenge that faced them in upper-level classes. These warnings made the students in my study wary of moving up the academic ladder.

This was particularly true of Wisdom and Paul, the two students on monitor-status and formally exited from ELL programs, and Ken; all of whom were eager to move up to tracking ladder and onto college. Both Wisdom and Paul expressed disappointment in the level of expectations for the Level 2 classes. When I regularly asked Paul about his English class and the activities he took part in, he inevitably answered that it was “boring” or that the other students “didn’t really care.” Wisdom commented that he felt he would have a more attentive teacher if he could get into Level 3 classes, saying “I knew I could do better in Level 3, because Level 2 is sometimes boring and the teacher doesn’t care.” Wisdom also had a friend in Level 3 classes, a senior who often studied together with Paul and Wisdom after school at the library. She had recently received a college scholarship for a four-year college, and her experiences in Level 3 classes and her college acceptance and scholarship reaffirmed his belief that “better students” were in those classes. Ken also took note of the desirability of Level 3 classes, saying at registration time: “I want to be in a higher level. I ask [the teacher], but I know it is going to be Level 2. Cause I know I am not taking lower classes because I’m not that bad. I’m



not taking higher classes cause I'm not sure I can do all [the work]." Ken's statement was indicative of both the desirability of the upper-level courses, but also the sense of fear that came with thoughts of "jumping the track."

Although Ken, Paul, and Wisdom were not quite sure about the specifics of what Level 3 classes might entail, they had established some assumptions about those classes. First, they assumed that in Level 3 classes the teachers might be more attentive and the work more interesting and stimulating than their current class. Second, they thought students in those classes might be more attentive to school work and share their similar academic goals and aspirations.. Third, they all knew from their summer school program at the university and their talks with academic advisors there that Level 3 classes were a gateway to college. Although they had limited interaction with other Level 3 peers, each of them considered Level 3 classes to be highly desirable.

But as the year went on, all of them became more resigned to their tracking identification. As Ken explained, when it came time for sophomore-year registration: "Most teachers suggest you to go to the second level. Except if you are doing really, really well and the teacher thinks you shouldn't be in that level." The bar of "doing really, really well" was often difficult for the students to decipher, and the pressure created by the recommendations of counselors and teachers often outweighed a student's own sense of his abilities. For example, Wisdom was convinced that after five years in the United States and the accolades of teachers from across the disciplines and in middle school that he could "jump the track." But when it came time to register for classes, he was subtly encouraged to remain where he was. As Wisdom explained it,

I wanted to have all [Level] 3s though. I definitely wanted to take Level 3 English. [...] In English, I was going to take Level 3, because I know it is

something I could have done. I have a strong B in English. I think I'd have a better teacher than the one I have now. [...] I could have signed up for Level 3, but [the teacher] and [the guidance counselor] suggested Level 2. [The guidance counselor] told that I could take [Level 3] but she would recommend Level 2.

In the end, Wisdom registered for a Level 2 English class, somewhat afraid to question the recommendations of his counselor.

Paul had a similar experience when he tried to negotiate his way into Level 3 classes. When Paul began high school, he was one of the first students to express disappointment in his class schedule, particularly his Level 2 placements in English, Science and Math. He had hoped that in at least one of those classes when he started his freshman year; when that didn't happen in his initial schedule, he held onto the hope that he would be able to move up to a Level 3 by the mid-semester. In Level 2 English, he was particularly disappointed by what he deemed the "easy" assignments and the lack of engagement on the part of his classroom peers. But when he approached the counselors and the English teacher to discuss his placement in Level 2, and the possibility of moving into Level 3 classes, he was issued the warning "about not being able to drop the class if he was failing" and he was told that he "might not be ready for the challenge," in his words.

When I spoke to Paul about his decision regarding registration for the following school year, his sophomore year, he spoke with resignation:

C: What English class are you taking next year?

P: English Level 2.

C: What do you want to be taking?

P: Whatever I am supposed to take.

Paul's resignation speaks to the power of the warnings issued by teachers and counselors. At that time of the dialogue above, Paul had given up on Level 3 classes, and he spoke with resignation as he discussed his schedule for his sophomore year. His sense of resignation is key here. In many ways, it is debatable if Paul was ready for Level 3 classes or not. What is striking is that he was never given any transparent criteria for moving up the academic track or any encouragement to continue his quest. He never learned why he wasn't ready for Level 3 classes, and the system of "all or nothing" scared him into submission. He didn't even want to take the chance of trying the upper-level classes. Instead, his insistence and his inquiries were rebuffed, undermining his determination and causing him doubt his own sense of himself as a college-bound student.

Throughout their first-year of high school, none of the students was able to move up the academic track. Ken and Wisdom often echoed Paul's desire for upper-level classes. They saw themselves as hard-working students, good critical thinkers, and intelligent. They questioned their membership in the group labeled "Level 2" students. Each of them stressed to me that they were in higher level classes in their homelands. They were respectful, intellectually curious, and willing to do their school work. In their large Level 2 classes, they often felt anonymous and out of place. They commented about being surrounded by students that often did not do their homework, did not seem engaged by the subject matter, and did not seem motivated about the future and college. Indeed, all of the student participants commented that their American peers just didn't seem as motivated or as respectful in comparison to peers in their homelands. In their sophomore

year, only Therese had managed to move up the academic track to Level 2 classes in English and Science and that too proved to be problematic.

The experiences that Paul, Wisdom, Miguel, Therese, and Ken had with the academic tracking system permeated through many of the aspects of social identity that I discuss in the remainder of this chapter and their academic writing development discussed in chapters six and seven. But unlike many of their native-English speaking peers in similarly tracked courses, the students in my study found themselves marked by another institutional category: English language learner (ELL). Beyond institutional labels that track academic levels, like Levels 1-4 and Advanced Placement, most schools also designate students into categories for special services like Special Education and ELL (or ESL, ESOL, etc.). Much like the academic tracks, the institutional label of “ELL” carries with it a set of identifiers and perceptions that influence the way the students in my study experience school. “ELL” is often a term that denotes linguistic and cultural identity and difference, and for the students participating in this study, the layer of ELL adds new categories and shifts to the establishment of their social identity in the high school.

#### **Identification: Being members of the ELL Group at Mill River North**

*When social identity is unsatisfactory individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct.*

- Tajfel and Turner (40)

Tajfel and Turner define “identification” as the part of social identity where individuals see themselves as group members. For ELL students in this study, that sense of

identification is complicated by the perceptions on “English Language Learners” by their peers and teachers and their own concerns about what it means to be “ELL” in their school. They knew that from the “external criteria” of the school administration has labeled them “ELL.” And even for those students like Paul and Wisdom, who were no longer formally enrolled in ELL program, they know that their accents and their race give them away as ethnic and linguistic minorities to their peers and their teachers. They could not hide their ethnicity. And even though, they didn’t actively mention issues of testing and racial unrest in their discussions, their interviews over time revealed a fascinating subtext that spoke to their own reservations about being known as “ELL” students in their schools.

### **Perceptions of “ELL” at Mill River North**

*I have picked up the latest edition of the school newspaper, an impressive effort put forth by journalism students and their advisor. An impressive array of front page stories on city budget politics, the new SAT test, and school events, along with a number of photographs. As I look through the paper, I’m struck by the student faces that dot the sixteen pages. White, Caucasian. In glancing around the library, I am struck by the contrast. An outsider picking up the student newspaper might easily think this is suburban, white middle-class high school with little diversity.*  
(Field notes, February 2004)

In the six student newspapers that I collected throughout my observations, I was continually struck by the faces that appeared on the pages and the names of student editors and columnists. Consistently, in the 30-35 photographs that were in each issue, only 1-2 photos (only 3%) showed students of color or non-native English speakers. The stories and headlines also reflect those percentages. Yet despite this trend, the diversity of the school is discovered and unburied as one reads the content of the newspaper’s stories

and features. In a story on the state budget plans, one article notes that the school district receives extra funding, “due the needs of its students body, its inner city location, various family situations and incomes, and *ethnically diverse student body* [which] make Mill River North a prime recipient of funds”(my emphasis, 6). Equated with urban poverty, the statement implies that “ethnically diverse student population” is another problem in a long list of problems for the school. In another issue, there is a story of a student-led Amnesty International event, a showing of the movie *No Man’s Land* on the atrocities of the war in the Balkans. The student editors wrote:

Mill River North is composed of a vast array of ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds. The diversity, while often improving the atmosphere of the school, unfortunately also leads to interracial tensions.  
(Student newspaper)

The editors encouraged students to attend the event, noting it “will expose many students to events of which they are not aware”—this is, despite the fact that the second largest language group at the school is Bosnian. In the final statement, the editors call for more active dialogue by the student population to come up “with plausible solutions for the obstacle the Mill River North community faces.” I am struck by the word “obstacle” and the overtones of racial and ethnic tension that are inherent throughout the student newspaper.

The paradox that existed between the photographs and the content was striking; it spoke volumes about the place of ELL students at Mill River North and the kinds of identity negotiations that my student participants negotiated on a daily basis. They were nonexistent and, at the same time, “an obstacle” for the community to face. For Therese, Ken, Wisdom, Miguel and Paul, the paradox between existent and non-existent

highlighted the fine line of identity negotiation that occurred in the hallways, the classrooms, and in the courtyard on a daily basis.

In a focus group interview with all five participants, I asked about this paradox.

The room became alive with conversation:

Ken: The kids in band. They are really mean. Some Spanish [speakers] (glances at the Therese, Miguel, and Paul) said in front of my face, 'What's up, Chink?'"

Miguel: Who said that?

Ken: There is the Spanish guy. Everybody said, "just ignore him." ... (pauses)... But he is like the other people. The kids in the band –well, it's like when I am talking and you know, I don't know that much about English –the words, vocab and stuff. So they laugh....(pauses)... But they don't laugh anymore.

Christina: Why not? What changed?

Ken: Cause I was like so mad about it. I told them if this keeps happening, I'll quit band.

In the focus group, held in November, the student participants all agreed that they have encountered some degree of prejudice with regard to their ethnic, racial, or linguistic backgrounds. But when I asked them how they view these instances, they were unsure what to make of the incidents. The students contended that the incidents were the acts of a few individuals; they were not indicative of the entire school community. Overall, the students, all five of them were hesitant to label anything as "racism;" they knew the power of the word and invoked it only with great care and caution.

In an essay written for his ELL class, Ken demonstrated that caution when writing about his school. Ken's writing is his first draft for this assignment and is reflective of his English writing proficiency after only thirteen months in the U.S. He writes:

Every school tries to create a good learning experience. So does North! We have a new building with new classrooms and a new library. It's a big school, and we have a courtyard so we can go outside, not just stay in the building. There are a lot of people from different countries. Therefore, we

can learn about different cultures from them. We can see positives parts of North. However, the building will become students “Art museum”; the courtyard will become a different kind of place when the weather changes. These are the problems. And the biggest problem is “Racism.”

In the two paragraphs that follow, Ken describes the graffiti problem at his school, noting that “tags” can be found everywhere in the high school. He then discusses how the winter weather makes the courtyard a slippery and dangerous place to walk. In his final paragraph, Ken discusses his concern over “racism” in his school. I will share his writing at length here:

The biggest problem at Mill River North is “Racism.” There are two possibility of racism. First possibility is there are some teachers and students are being racist and giving ESOL students a hard time. Some teachers are just being mean to them. Maybe they hates the people from other countries or maybe they think they are better because they are “White.” A lot of students are laugh at them and making fun of ESOL students just because they think U.S.A. is better than any other countries and where they come from is uncivilized. I really have to say this shows that Americans have very limited outlook and experience. Another possibility is ESOL students think people are being racist. There are always some kids don’t follow school’s rules. For example, wearing hat in the school, not behaving in the class, don’t listen to the teacher, and not doing their work. Because one of the reasons that I listed or for other reason they get detentions or been sent to the office, they say the teachers are being racist. Teachers are just doing their job. Some of the students really have to learn how to respect. Racism is not just in the U.S.A.; every country has the same problem.

Hopefully in the future [...] people will respect to each other; if you don’t respect people then don’t expect people will respect you. If we can solve these problems together, Mill River North will become the best school ever.

Ken’s essay reflects the dual nature of how my student participants viewed “racism” in their high school. The term itself seemed to have both valid and invalid uses; sometimes it was used to describe remarks and incidents targeted against ELL students, and other times, my student participants saw the term used in a way that enabled ELL students to



make excuses for poor judgments and choices. And, my sense is that as first-year students, they weren't sure what the real truth was. In fact, the ambiguity they felt about racism at Mill River North matched their own sense of ambiguity when it came to their experiences as ELL students.

Furthermore, not every student in the study reported negative experiences at Mill River North. During the focus group conversation in early November, Therese discussed the aspects of the why she likes high school and why she doesn't like "being ELL"<sup>21</sup>:

I just feel like a normal kid. I go to school and take my classes. My teachers don't ask me if I am an ESL kid. And sometimes when my teachers don't understand, I just asking. I don't have to say that "I'm ESL." Because when you say that, people laugh at you. And they think, just cause you're an ESL kid, they think you are stupid. And I don't like that.

The latter part of her statement speaks to the negative construction of ELL students as "stupid" and "[laughed] at." It is an experience and a source of anxiety that almost all the participants spoke about—experiences and anxieties that many, like Wisdom and Therese, had had in the past and that others, like Ken and Paul were still experiencing in the present. And throughout the year, those anxieties and experiences often came up again when the students thought they had finally closed the lid on that negative perspective.

In fact, they were all eager to see the best of a situation, never the worst. Like the beginning of Therese' statement shows, there is a tone of optimism in each student's discussion of race and "being ELL" at Mill River North. In part, that optimism reflects "a belief in social mobility"—a sense that that through hard work, talent, and maybe luck,

---

<sup>21</sup> Throughout my interviews, the students regularly interchanged "ELL" and "ESL" in their discussions. In many ways, that "ELL" and "ESL" shift was indicative of their teachers, who had only recently adapted to the term "ELL" to align to state and federal standards, but still used the term "ESL" in passing or in casual conversations.

anything is possible, including moving into another, more desirable social group (Tajfel and Turner 35). The students were all, for the most part, idealists and optimists. They believed wholeheartedly in the American dream, the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” storyline, and they were firm in their refusal to let others, particularly the few who targeted them with blatant racial and linguistic bias, destroy their sense of dream and ambition. In our focus group meeting, I asked students about the levels of difference and if that difference lead to any problems at their school. Wisdom commented:

Everybody is the same at middle school. But at the high school, you get all different kinds of people. Its very difficult to mix all the colors together. Everybody wants to be different in so many different ways.

When I asked the group to elaborate on these kinds of differences, Paul jumped in to explain his experiences:

When we begin to read aloud in class, first one White kid reads, and then it is my turn and I sounds a lot different from him or her.

The other students nodded their heads in acknowledgment. They knew that their accents often marked them as outsiders. It was the role of “outsider” that concerned them the most. They wanted to blend. And yet, they acknowledged as Therese noted earlier that the “ELL label” was often be construed as a negative in the school—a deficit model that the students in my study wanted distance from. At the end of the day, each of the participants worried that people, particularly teachers and peers, would think they were stupid and question their intellectual prowess, because they were non-native speakers of English.

Throughout the course of the study, each student acknowledged an undercurrent of negativity associated with “being ELL.” On some levels, the derogatory and ethnic slurs were obvious to the students, and they noted that they were the comments of a small

minority of students at Mill River North. But there were also larger institutional concerns that seemed to feed into this negative construction of English language learners. With the advent of NCLB and state-sanctioned testing mandates, the concerns over testing and standards created a more subtle form of pressure to move away from the “ELL” label. In the year prior to my study, Mill River North did not meet the state standards for English and Math. In the fall of my research, the school newspaper reported that:

Mill River North was unable to meet No Child Left Behind’s requirement, which stated that students of all demographics must meet a certain quota of basic or higher achievement. Groups are based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and whether foreign students are proficient in English.

In the article, a guidance counselor was quoted, explaining the problem, “We have to account for every single sophomore in the building. It reflects on your school. [...] We always may be in the position because we have to test all... students that don’t ...speak English...and they all figure into our scores.” The blame on the ELL population was inherent in that statement, and its placement in the school newspaper helped to create a culture infused with negative perceptions of second language students. And although the students in my study only had a few racially charged conflicts or confrontations over the course of the school year, they seemed to pick up on the subtle undercurrent of negativity that flowed throughout the hallways and classrooms. Instinctively, they could tell that being an “outsider,” “being ELL” wasn’t necessarily a good thing in their school, even if the signs were subtle. As a result, each of the participants made a pointed effort not to identify themselves in the group category of “ELL” during their first year at Mill River North. Strikingly, the strategic tactic used most often by all the participants to accomplish this goal was to compare themselves against other ELL students in their school.

**Comparison: The Sliding Scale of ELL, or “I’m Not ELL,  
Those Other Kids Are...”**

*The basic hypothesis...is that pressure to evaluate one’s own group positively, through in-group/out-group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other.[...]The aim of differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimension.*

- Tajfel and Turner (40-41)

Mill River North is a striking setting to research the social identities of second language writers because the demographics of the second language students has shifted dramatically in recent years. Over the past few years, over 6,000 refugees from Sub-Saharan African nations, including the Congo, Sudan, and Somalia have relocated to the school district. What is striking about the addition of these students to the school district is that it has created a sliding scale of what it meant to be categorized as ELL.

When I begin my interviews with my student participants, the references to these other groups of ELL learners begin almost immediately. Ken explained to me, “You know... there are some people [in the ELL program]. They are not even Level 1 ESL. They don’t even know their letters or how to speak. And other behaviors. And the teacher, she was like, ‘some kids don’t even go to school [in their homelands].’”

In another conversation about being “ELL” at Mill River North, Therese commented to me, “There are some ESL kids now. They come from the Congo or Africa. They don’t speak much English.”

For his part, Wisdom noted that he often felt a sense of kinship with the kids from the African countries, since he was from Nigeria. Sometimes he sat near them at lunch, but he didn’t quite feel part of their community because of the language barriers. They

spoke tribal languages different than his own. He eagerly stood up on their behalf when conversations in his school or community turned negative about their presence in the schools. In some ways, he felt like an ambassador for these newcomers, although he rarely interacted with them. He was a go-between, someone who has first-hand knowledge of refugee camps and war-torn nations, but distanced through his time in the United States and his assimilation into Level 2 classes, soccer teams, and band practice. He did not identify as one of “them,” but still felt a kinship, a connection as he watched their experiences from a distance.

The “us, not them” approach exhibited by my participants in reaction to the newer refugee students was not simply about English language proficiency. The new students provided students like Wisdom, Therese, and Ken with a chance to distance themselves from the ELL category. They saw the category of “ELL” and then identified who was in that category. Refugee students who didn’t know their letters, who had little schooling their first language, and who needed donated bookbags and hygiene supplies did not match how Wisdom, Therese and Ken identified or categorized themselves. As a result of that comparison, they determined that “those new kids are ELL, therefore we are not.” And their school peers seemed to have the same perspective for the most part. The refugee students were the real ELL kids. As one peer of Ken’s explained to me during one of my visits to his school: “Ken isn’t really ELL. He speaks English. I can understand him” (Field notes).

But at the same, the school newspaper confirmed a culture that did not always distinguish among the ELL students. It did not distinguish between one set of ELL students and the next, and neither did many of the teachers. The student newspaper

confirmed Therese, Ken and Wisdom's sense that the ELL category at Mill River North was often defined by the refugee students. On one observation, I walk through the hallway and see signs throughout the corridors, reading "Help the Refugees"—a group of Mill River North students is working to gather book bags for the new refugee students. At the end of the drive, the newspaper reported that the students had donated 12 backpacks, "containing basic school supplies and hygiene items" to the ELL department. A picture in the newspaper showed students handing the ELL director the box of supplies. Strikingly, none of the ELL students were to be seen. They remained invisible on the newspaper pages. This sense of invisibility that I discussed earlier in this chapter played a role in how ELL students were all lumped together in the collective consciousness of the school identity and social groups. For as much as, Ken, Therese, and Miguel wanted to distance themselves from the refugee ELL students, they were inextricably linked through their linguistic differences and participation in ELL classes.

Another headline in the school papers read, "Mill River Welcomes with Open Arms." The story was focused on the ELL students and the ELL program at Mill River North, one of only two stories, to do so over a five-month period. The story explained that:

ELL teacher and current ELL students gave up free periods and volunteered their time to help aid students who had recently arrived in the country. These students welcomed with open arms refugees from impoverished countries. These admirable students were commended for sacrificing their time to help students new to the U.S. and Mill River North.

Again, there was little distinction made between "current" ELL students and the newcomers; there are no discussions of proficiency levels. Nor did the newspaper

provide a balance by including stories about advanced English language learners and other English Speakers of Other Language in other stories on student achievements and experiences.

In one of my discussions with an ELL teacher, I asked about the refugee students and their emerging literacy program. She confirmed that she too saw a difference between the more experienced ELL students and the newcomers. In particular, many of the newcomers did not have a first-language (L1) literacy to draw upon, unlike the students participating in my study. Without that L1 literacy background, the level of transference from first language to second language was minimal, making the task of learning a new language all the more daunting. That difference did in fact create a hierarchy for the second language students in the schools.<sup>22</sup> It was a difference that the students in my study used to their advantage in order to align themselves more closely to the mainstream, native English speakers (a positively viewed social group) and away from the other English language learners (a negatively viewed social group). In fact, these identity negotiations, on the part of the students, mirrored Tajfel and Turner's theory that individuals will move toward a "more positive social identity" and differentiate themselves from negatively perceived social groups. The ELL teacher at Mill River North commented that she, too, saw her more advanced ELL students, like

---

<sup>22</sup> This hierarchy was also furthered by teacher initiatives that have advanced ELL students tutoring the new refugees. The effort, a well-intentioned one, sought to give advanced students a sense of achievement and accomplishment, placing them in the role of tutor, instead of tutee. Strikingly, though, in the broader school community, the initiative grouped advanced ELL students more closely with the ELL newcomers, who were struggling to attain functional literacy. For example, an article in the school paper notes that in early Spring, the Mill River school board recognized students from Mill River North high school's ELL department. The students were asked to stand up at the meeting to be "recognized for their work in providing peer tutoring for new arrivals [for the ELL department] and helping them adjust to Mill River North." The article did not differentiate or even mention by name the advanced ELL students who volunteered their time for this effort. They remained anonymous, and all the students involved were identified simply by the umbrella term "ELL."

Miguel, Therese and Ken, creating a distance between themselves and the newcomers, and in my discussions with the ELL director, I learned that many more traditional (read: non-refugee) ELL students were eager to “get out” of ELL classes and be “exited from the ELL program.”

In fact, the students in my study did not use any of the ELL resources available to them, outside of their single assigned ELL class. Extra tutoring and homework help were made available to them, but they never used them. In one interview, I asked Miguel about these tutoring sessions:

C: Do you have any tutors at Mill River North that you can go to? Are there any ESL tutors?

M: Well, there are some tutors or something in there where you can go.

C: Have you gone?

M: (Shakes his head).

C: Why not?

M: I don't know. I just haven't gone there.

In fact, none of the student participants sought out any additional ELL tutoring and services throughout the school year. For Miguel and Therese, these services were meticulously articulated in their ELL classes and by their ELL teachers. They even copied out the procedures for the locating the ELL tutor in their writing notebooks. The notes explained that tutors were available during study halls, lunch periods, and free periods, and that passes could be obtained from their teachers. When I asked the students about this room, most of them told me that they didn't know it existed. All of them informed me that they wouldn't have used it anyway. I cannot help but think that part of their reluctance to use and seek out these services was because of their desire to move away from the social group of “ELL” and its negative (and I would add, false) associations with illiteracy and stupidity.



### **Identification: Shifts in ELL Identity Across Institutional Contexts**

The students' negotiations to shift away from the category of ELL and its perceived negative association was often context specific—what it meant to be “ELL” was dependent on the demographics and the numbers of English language learners in the school context. The importance of context became clear to me when one of my participants, Miguel, transferred to a new high school, mid-way through the research. That turn of events created an interesting opportunity to compare one student's experiences and identity negotiations as an English language learner in two distinct settings. Miguel's transfer to Mill River South, another high school in the district, came about as a precautionary measure on the part of his mother. It was an effort to protect him from an escalating conflict with his former middle school friends. Miguel, for his part, started his year at Mill River North with the best of intentions.

#### **Miguel at Mill River North**

In my field notes, I wrote:

Miguel seems to be very enthusiastic about this research project and the process... [...] He brings writing and samples of his school work to every meeting, And he is talking about his participation in this project at school. He seems honored and must see some sort of currency in mentioning his participation to his teachers.[...] In some ways, I wonder if his participation in the project is creating an identity as “the scholarship boy” for Miguel.

In one of early interviews in September, Miguel confirmed my suspicions. In a discussion on his ESL class, he explained, “I was talking to [my ESL teacher] about this [research project]...He's like, I am really proud of you, Miguel, that you are doing this” and stuff like that. [...].He's like, I'm proud of you...you're my favorite. See... I'm quiet in the class all time. I'm just doing my work.” For Miguel, being “a favorite” by his teachers

was what he deemed success. On some level, he seemed to believe that if he cast himself “as the good student,” his grades and his level of academic literacy would improve as well. At North, Miguel worked diligently to impress his teachers and to do well in his grades. At the end of the first quarter, he proudly shared his report card and noted that he worked hard to improve the grades from his last progress reports, raising them in three out of five of his classes.

But as much as Miguel was making inroads as a student, his decision to cast himself as a “student” was not without social consequence. His desire to be a good student had a social cost. By late September, Miguel found himself abandoned by many of his former middle school friends, including his best friend. As Miguel described, these friends, fellow Latinos, were “not doing good” in school, often suspended, in detention, and “cutting classes.” Miguel told me that his best friend “wasn’t like this in middle school...he [had] changed.” The situation between the two former friends became confrontational, both in school and out of school. On two separate occasions, Miguel was “jumped” by a group of Latinos, led by his former friend. The fights were broken up by the police. By mid-November, Miguel informed me that the other kids watched him every day, and they followed him as he walked home from school, waiting for another chance to fight. Miguel thought they wanted him to become more like them. The incidents affected Miguel’s sleep, his willingness to do homework, and his attentiveness in his classes. Miguel worried that some teachers and administrators had started to associate him with the “bad kids,” because of the fights and because he was also Latino. When Miguel told his mother about the escalating threats against him, she worried about

him being drawn further into the violence, and she made the decision to move him to another school in the district, Mill River South.

### **Miguel at Mill River South**

Although only a few miles separated Mill River North from Mill River South, it may as well have been a world away. While Mill River North reflected all the elements of an urban community and an urban high school, Mill River South was far more suburban, less gritty, and privileged. The school, with a student population of approximately 2000 students, served a mix of neighborhoods, some reflecting single family homes, as well as apartments and condominiums. Additionally, Mill River South served as the high school for the affluent community of Riverdale that bordered it. The Riverdale students were predominately Caucasian; their parents were often lawyers, CEOs, doctors, and engineers. The Riverdale students made up about 45% of the student population at Mill River South, and according to Riverdale town statistics, about 75% of those students are enrolled in the upper level, college-track courses. Close to 95% of the school population was Caucasian, and only 4% was Latino.

During my first visits to Mill River South, I was struck by the new athletic fields and bleachers. As I walked from the faculty parking lot to the main building, I passed the tennis courts, surrounded by new black fencing, landscaped pathways, and water fountains. The sign on high school entrance welcomed visitors and pointed in the direction of the main office. The hallways gleamed with fresh paint, new lockers, and a new addition. The hallways were less crowded than Mill River North, and there seemed to be a greater pace of leisure and less anxiety here. The faculty members regularly stopped and chatted in the hallways or from the doorways. Physically, there seemed to be

more space here. The English teachers had their own office space—a department office with each teacher having her/his own desk, bookcase, coffee mugs, and other personal items. When I met with Miguel’s English teacher there, the office was a center of activity and camaraderie, as other teachers stopped in, picked up materials, and chatted about the day’s events. Unlike Mill River North, where teachers and administrators always seemed to be in a hurry, embattled and worried; Mill River South reflected a sense of calmness and ease.

When Miguel transferred to Mill River South, he became one of 35 English language learners registered at the school. When I asked Miguel about moving to Mill River South, he was eager for the change. “Because I got friends there too.[...] I am a friendly guy.” In fact, his transition to Mill River South was remarkably smooth, and I was surprised at how many teachers and administrators knew him after only a few weeks. But perhaps even more fascinating is the shift that occurred in terms of Miguel’s “ELL” identity. While his identity as a Latino and an English language learner carried with it an overtone of negativity at Mill River North; at Mill River South, his identity as English language learner was prized. His presence, along with the presence of the other 34 English language learners, added to a much-sought after level of diversity and multiculturalism to Mill River South. When I meet the ELL teacher at South, she was overjoyed with the opportunity to introduce to her diverse students—an exchange student from Thailand, a girl from Kenya who wants to be a doctor, a daughter of an executive from Kuwait, a boy from Nepal. She noted that the ELL students were like a family in this school, and she made an effort to encourage their efforts at every turn. Throughout the hallways, the presence of these second language students was recognized and

honored. On a bulletin board, outside of the library, a notice on lavender paper announced an upcoming event on “Cultural Diversity.” The description read, “We are hoping to bring in a speaker to talk about bullying and then have a cultural dinner in the cafeteria in the evening to celebrate *what a mixed school we are*” (my emphasis). Down the hallway, another prominent bulletin board asked, “Where in the world are we from?” above a large world map. Pins with small flags dotted the places where English language learners at South come from. Around the map, “Welcome” was written on sheets of shiny, bright construction paper in 22 different languages. The array of languages and countries that were represented by these students is a source of pride for the ELL teacher and the school. ELL students were valued at Mill River South, and they were often put on display as a token of the school’s diversity. But in my survey of teachers at the school, some of them commented with concern that although some multilingual students, like the exchange students, never needed any extra help, other second language students, like Miguel, did not have the level of support that they needed to be academically successful. As one teacher noted, “It concerns me that we don’t have enough time with any student who might need individual help. It also concerns me that our school seems to lack adequate resources for multilingual students.” I provide more insight into these concerns in the following chapter.

For Miguel, the change in contexts meant that his identity had shifted from his last days at Mill River North, where he worried about being seen as underachiever, “troublemaker” or a potential member of a Latino gang. At Mill River South, Miguel was part of the treasured ELL “collection” of students at the school, and it meant he was given a place of honor. He loved it. During one of my visits, I ran into the assistant

principal and one of the math teachers in the hallway. They told me that there had been some discussion of Miguel moving out of state because of his mother's work. In our discussion, they described him as: "a great kid." "a sweetheart" and "never in any trouble." They noted that it would be a "real loss" for the school if he left. At Mill River South, Miguel found that "being ELL" was privileged and desirable; the category of ELL had shifted.

### **Self-categorization: Wisdom reclaims the ELL identity**

Self-categorization "seeks to explain social variations in how people define and categorize themselves and the effects of such variations.[...] Which self-category is salient at any particular time is a function of people being ready to use a specific category...and its fit with the stimulus data..[...] Self-categorization does not imply that people always conform. One can re-categorize oneself, the group and/or the situation.

- John Turner (155, 157).

When John Turner updated Social Identity Theory in the 1990s, he included a self-categorization component that took into account the flexible nature of social identity. He noted that an individual can see him or herself as part of a group and also as a unique individual. Individuals could and would adapt their self-defined social categorization based on the given situation or conflict, particularly if there was an opportunity to align oneself with a social grouping that built consensus or gained positive response. The category of self-categorization provided for what Turner saw as flexible shift in self-perception and a more fluid construction of identity (157).

In this study, the idea of a "fluid construction of identity" became a tangible reality as I witnessed my student participants compare and contrast themselves with other ELL students in the ELL program, placing distance between themselves and other second

language learners. This was particularly true of Wisdom and Paul, the two students in the study who had been formally exited from ELL programs two years earlier, who did not participate in any ELL classes at Mill River North, and who were fully mainstreamed in classes across the disciplines. Both Paul and Wisdom often related to me that their English language proficiency levels were much higher than the other study participants and that as a result, their experiences were vastly different from the experiences of Ken, Miguel, and Therese who were relative newcomers, in comparison.

But an encounter between Wisdom and his English teacher made me realize that there were circumstances in which second language writers might reclaim their status and identity as “English language learners,” particularly when faced with a conflict that threatened their academic standing. In the section that follows, I will share at length the story of Wisdom’s conflict in the classroom and his subsequent moves to self-categorize (or perhaps re-categorize) himself as an English language learner.

### **First Impressions**

As the most proficient member of the research participants, Wisdom’s familiarity with English made him particularly difficult to categorize as ELL throughout the study. Wisdom had been exited from ELL service during seventh grade and did not participate in any ELL services at the high school. In fact, the ELL teachers were not even aware of his presence at the school. As a student on “monitor status,” the responsibility for Wisdom’s academic journey was primarily in the hands of the guidance department and its counselors, who would check his grades and progress as he signed up for courses each year. Wisdom also did not categorize himself as an ELL student. He was very proud of the fact that he had done so well in his classes, particularly his mainstream English

classes, at the middle school, and he was looking forward to having that same success in ninth grade.

When Wisdom entered his classes at Mill River North, he did not tell teachers that English was his second language or share his experiences with ELL teachers in middle school. In our conversation about the pros and cons of telling teachers about his linguistic background, Wisdom explained:

The positive thing about me mentioning it is so that when [my English teacher] sees my writing, she sees the way I phrase my words. She will consider me as a English-as-a-second-language [in her grading]. And the negative thing is that if I don't tell her, and she sees some things that are kinda weird in my way of writing, she will mark it bad and grade it the other way. Because she did not know [my writing] was English-as-a-Second Language.

Wisdom decided that he didn't want to share his linguistic background with his high school teachers, preferring instead to be evaluated against his native-English speaking peers. As he told me in an early fall interview, "The reason I chose to be in mainstream classes is because if I see more challenge in front of me. It makes me a better student." During the first few weeks of high school, he quickly enjoyed the fact that his linguistic background appeared to be a non-issue for his teachers. He explained to me: "I am in the mainstream, so they didn't ask [about his linguistic background.]"

However, when Wisdom began to experience conflict with his English teacher, he made moves that re-categorized his identity as an ELL student, a cultural outsider, and a non-native speaker of English. In the following excerpt, I will briefly explain the cause of the fallout and its subsequent escalation. In the first few weeks of September, Wisdom seemed eager to succeed in English class. His past experiences as a good English student



and student writer in the middle school made him eager to practice his writing craft and demonstrate his intellect for his new teacher. In early September, he described his English teacher by saying: “She is a very nice teacher so far. She’s funny, yeah. She’s open to the students and she knows how to do the job...About a week ago....we were doing pronouns, nouns, commons nouns, plurals. And stuff like that. Right, we are doing more writing. .. more descriptive things.”

### **The Conflict**

But by the beginning of October, a conflict took place between Wisdom and his English teacher that would play a decisive role in his level of academic motivation and achievement. The conflict began when his teacher accused Wisdom of working on another school assignment during her classtime, an accusation that Wisdom denied. The incident led to a confiscation of his science homework and she reported the incident to his science teacher. For Wisdom, the incident meant he has lost face with his science teacher. The false accusation and the way this incident transcended the English classroom and poured into his other subject area bothered Wisdom immensely. The conflict between teacher and student escalated further in the days that followed, as Wisdom explained in the following interview:

W: She told me that she was going to give me a detention because I was reading my Bible right before class started. Right before class starts, I put my Bible away. She said she was going to give me a detention for reading it...

C: For reading the Bible or for reading anything?

W: I was reading the Bible and I was taking notes out of it. And she said I should put that away. It was before class, like right after the third bell rings. And I was putting that away, and I was taking some papers out. And so I ask her, why is that she always picks on me, because if I say a word to my friend, she always take it. She always seems to forget all

the other people that were talking and pin the whole thing on me. So I didn't like that. So I said [to her], why does she always do that to me?

C: During class?

W: Yes, and then she give me a detention. And I ...was to do the detention for her, and I was not able to go yesterday, because I had a soccer game. [...] And then [on the next day] she called on me and ask me why I didn't come for her detention. I told her that I had to leave early for the soccer game. She wouldn't let me explain it. She wouldn't let me explain the reason why I was not there. She was like, "Too bad, you left. You did not come to my detention. You have to serve it after school or before school." She reported that to the assistant principal. And [the assistant principal] called me down to the office.

The incident led to Wisdom's first office detention, a mark on his academic record that he felt labeled him as "a punk, a problem kid." In our interview sessions that followed his detention, Wisdom began to complain about the teacher's assignments and her lack of response to his writing. He found fault with her teaching practices and was angered by her lack of interest in his work. He was frustrated that she did not hand back his papers or provide response to his writing. He also told me that the biggest problem was that his English teacher "just doesn't know who I am."

The conflict between teacher and student here was not an unusual one. And it was not surprising that Wisdom's immediate reaction to the conflict was to disengage. He stopped doing his English homework, telling me that it was "pointless." He also stopped reading. At one point, he tossed the copied pages of the book they were reading in the trash, saying, "No point in having it around. Not my problem." He told me in our sessions that "I definitely don't want to be in that class, because of the way she treats me." These reactions had an immediate impact on his academic progress. In his mid-term progress report, he received a C with the teacher comment: "NEEDS MORE SELF-DISCIPLINE." For Wisdom, a straight-A student in eighth grade, the grade and perhaps more significantly the teacher's comment, angered and disappointed him. And on

some level, it also scared him that the grade and comment might impact his academic

future, preventing him from achieving his dream of college. As Wisdom explained to me:

It [will] make me work a little harder to make sure that my grade does not lower than it is right now, because it is that C. It is a C in that class, and I don't want to go lower than it is. And also...it makes me angry. If the teacher is not willing to help me, if she is not willing to show me what I am doing wrong so that I can get a better grade in class, I feel that she does not want to see me succeed, to do better in that class. [...] Instead, she said I need more "self-discipline" on my progress report. And that was what really explode me. Out of six teachers, they don't say anything like that, which should tell you that I don't have problems with any other teachers like that.

When I spoke with Wisdom's English teacher, she acknowledged the strained relationship. She noted that things started off well and then turned awful. For her part, she believed that part of the conflict emerged from Wisdom's desire to sit at the front of the classroom. She noted that she moved him to the back in order to provide attention to other kids that were needy and needed more teacher attention. She also thought part of the problem was that he wasn't adapting well to being one of two freshmen on the varsity soccer team, and he didn't like upperclassmen putting him in his place. She wondered aloud, if gender may also play a role in the conflict, asking if Wisdom may have an issue with women in authority. My own interactions with him did not seem to support that assumption, but it was not beyond the realm of possibility. His past interactions with female teachers at the middle school have been positive. But I will note that I had seen him shut-down in similar ways when the female teacher of the summer bridge program accused him of misbehavior in the classroom. Both Wisdom and his English teacher dismissed the idea that race played a role in their conflict, even though his English teacher is Caucasian and Wisdom is African. Strikingly, in our conversation during the

early stage of the conflict, Wisdom's English teacher never referred to any aspect of his linguistic or cultural background, and for my part, I purposefully did not identify Wisdom as an "English language learner" in our conversations.

### **"She Doesn't Know Who I Am"**

As Wisdom relayed the story of the conflict to me during our interviews, he kept noting that his English teacher just didn't know "who I am." For him, the conflict became very much about his identity and his integrity in the classroom. His efforts to resolve the conflict surprised me, given his adamant self-portrait of a "mainstream student" and no longer an "ELL student." In an effort to deflate the situation and save his academic future, Wisdom decided that his English teacher had to learn more about "who he was." And he turned to his former ELL teacher, a teacher who had not had him as student for over two years and who exited him from the ELL program in the middle school two years prior to this conflict.

As Wisdom explained, "I called her. [...] She has been like a mother to me. She was at the middle school, and she knows a lot of stuff about me. She has always been there for me." For Wisdom, his former ELL teacher provided the combination of "comprehensible input and caring assistance," that Linda Lonon Blanton described in her work on the importance in the "child-teacher interactions" in second language writing (295). In his past experiences, Wisdom's ELL teacher provided "transformative encouragement, assistance, feedback, and love [...] both received and given—all of which allow a child to persist with courage and confidence to sort out the complexities of

literacy” (Blanton 305).<sup>23</sup> So when he met with difficulty in his quest for more literacy, he deemed that she was the right person to turn to, and he asked her to intervene on his behalf.

The former ELL teacher agreed to meet with a guidance counselor and the English teacher. As Wisdom explained:

- W: She told the guidance who I really am, because she knows who I am and what I can do.
- C: When you say “Who I am” – what do you mean by that?
- W: What I mean by that is that school is very important to me. And I have a lot of pressure on myself. I put a lot of pressure on myself to do good in school. She knows that school is very important to me. It is one of the things I have to pursue to make sure I do good. [...] She explained that to the guidance. That it’s not about the English. It is something that I take serious. That it is what I have to do.
- C: And do you think that the impression for the teacher was that you don’t take schools seriously.
- W: What she thought of me was that I was a wise guy. Someone...like some of the punks.
- C: Does [your former ELL teacher] help you to do show this without you having to talk about things yourself?
- W: It is just that since I have had her. [...] She knows everything about me. And so, it’s better for them, for her [the teacher] to hear it from someone else.
- C: Preferably another teacher?
- W: (nods) Because... you see, where I am coming from? She [the English teacher] may have a doubt of what I am saying, but she hears from a teacher, from a middle school to the high school. That kind of lets her know that this person is a person who knows who I really am.
- C: When Ms. Tollman, [the ELL teacher] talks about who you are to other people, do you think she talks about your family background or your coming from Nigeria?

---

<sup>23</sup> Blanton has described this transformative experience between teacher and student as the “dynamic of synchronicity,” “an affective-intellectual zone that teacher and child create with each other, a kind of ‘meeting place’” (304). As Blanton explains, “the dynamic of synchronicity is evidenced by fluid, ever subtle, and sometimes, inaudible exchange between child and teacher, teacher and child” (304). Blanton theorizes that the synchronicity works to encourage literacy development among children. Blanton found in her research that in classrooms where teachers and children “operated in sync,” “the transitions from drawing to writing, from invented to conventional spelling, from annotated drawings to illustrated stories, were rapid, organic, and joyful. There the children were comfortable with themselves as literate learners and with their systems of explanation of just how this transformation was taking place. And this, even when children were developing literacy in a language not their own” (305-306).

W: She doesn't really bring in my family background. [...] She talks about my cultural background. And my cultural background is that education is very important. And umm... we see this as very big opportunity for a change. And we pursue that thing and we always we want, I want to, and make a change with what I have. Or do the best with what I have in front of me.

The cultural background that Wisdom referred to here was directly linked to his identity as a Nigerian. It also spoke to his sense of tribal and family values in terms of education and academic success. I think the shift to “we” in the latter part of this interview excerpt is particularly important here, because it shows Wisdom moving from a singular sense of his identity within the school to a larger sense of his identity within his Nigerian village and country. He was representing his country in the English classroom, and when the teacher accused him of certain actions, she also inadvertently slandered his people and his country.

But Wisdom felt unable to address these cultural values with his English teacher. He could not talk to her about how that cultural connection affected his daily academic life and pursuits. As Wisdom explained,

The thing is that in order for me to talk to her about things like that, there has to be a relationship there. We ourselves have to build a relationship and talk about things like that. You can't just see a stranger and say, “oh, my families going through this and that.” You have to have something there.

He went on to add, “I didn't feel like babbling things out. And she could figure it out. She could understand that kind of background I come from.”

As Wisdom talked about the conflict, it struck me that he never received an invitation to share his cultural and linguistic heritage in the classroom. But in our other conversations, I saw that there were indeed some moments that might have lent themselves to a conversation on his cultural values and the conflict in Nigeria that

brought him to the U.S. In a discussion on genocide and the novel *Waves*, his English teacher talked about the kinds of conflicts that students at Mill River North high school have come from—Bosnia, Vietnam, and Sudan. On another occasion, she told her class that she regularly attends a teacher workshop day held by the ELL department in the school, where the ELL teachers provide mainstream teachers with a background on the ELL students are and the kinds of conflict some of them have experienced. In speaking with me, Wisdom even conceded that: “I think she kind of understands people that are like me. Their pasts, and my life. People that are foreign and what kind of different background they have. And what the school means to them.” But still, despite his willingness to acknowledge his teacher’s efforts, Wisdom remained adamant that he couldn’t have talked to her about himself. And part of the problem may be that he was not an “ELL student” anymore. He noted: “If she knew I was in an ESL program, that would have been a different story. But in the mainstream, you are treating like the same. But if I were in that program, she would probably understand that I come from a different place and that the way I speak or write is a little different from others.”

In our interviews, I asked:

C: Do you think she would have “cut you some more slack” if you would have been identified as “ELL”?

W: Yeah, I would probably say that.

### **The Paradox of “Being ELL”**

Wisdom’s struggle with “being ELL” is indicative of the identity paradox that many U.S. resident second language students find themselves in, struggling to move on into their futures and to assimilate to a dominant culture, while at the same time, honoring their pasts and their family histories, cultures, and values. It is a tall order. For Wisdom, his

challenge —his difficulty— was that if he didn't know what he wanted. Or perhaps, more clearly, his needs had shifted, as much as his identity had. He was sick and tired of telling his immigrant narrative— who can blame him? It was traumatic and difficult, and in his daily life, he needed, on a certain level, to let it go so that he could achieve some normalcy. He was tired of being defined by his refugee experiences and the trauma of his family and village's conflict.

Yet at the same time, he is defined by it. He, of his accord, defines himself, proudly, as his father's son—the hope of his family and his village. He put tremendous amount of pressure on himself to succeed academically because of those circumstances and loyalties. He had created enormous shoes to fill for himself, and so much of his drive and determination was built upon his experiences as a refugee and his sense of duty to his home village and country.

In this particular incident, Wisdom found that only by re-categorizing himself as “ELL” could he achieve some solidarity with his teacher and have her understand his values and academic ambitions. Whether it was an intentional or unintentional move, when Wisdom called his former ELL teacher to advocate on his behalf and tell his story, he realigned himself with the “ELL identity” at the institutional level, because his ELL teacher represented that institutional marker and categorization. She was an institutional figure, a member of the very institution that created the labels and categories. He did not turn to his pastor or his family members to advocate on his behalf. He turned to a teacher, because she could speak in the institutional setting and be heard. When I asked Wisdom, why he didn't want to advocate on his own behalf to his English teacher, he elaborated on this sense of paradox and conflict.



W: No, I don't think I would have shared it with her. I wrote about in sixth grade. I'm kinda of sick of it. [...] I get sick of talking about it. Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. I get tired of it. I don't want to run away from my history, but I get bored writing the same thing over and over again. You know what I mean?

C: But on some level, you also think that it would be helpful for teachers to know some of this background before they judge you in the classroom?

W: I don't know.

C: I see a bit of a contradiction. On one hand, you say I don't want to write about this anymore.

W: Exactly.

C: But on the other hand, you want the teacher to know who you are. Maybe not everything...But you want to know about your cultural values and expectations. For schools, etc.

W: She can know about that one. But then if we talked about that, then that one might creep in and then we can talk about the other stuff. If it creeps in then, it is okay to talk to about. But not just to jump in on the topic and start a blah-blah-blah.

C: So that is why you called [your former ELL teacher]?

W: Yeah.

C: Do you think [your former ELL teacher] was able to explain all that for you?

W: She probably did. I think she did.

### **The Aftermath**

When I spoke to Wisdom's English teacher later in the semester, she commented that the conflict may have stemmed from Wisdom's needs to feel special in the classroom. She added that this may be particularly true given "his family situation" and cultural background, hinting at her newfound insight into Wisdom's history. In another discussion later in the year, I spoke with his teacher about Wisdom and his writing. She shared pieces of his work with me, noting that his written work was in the middle of the pack for the class. (Wisdom's essay with his teacher's comments can be found in the Appendices). As a matter of fact, she submitted his paper as a "standard B" paper as part of her sample exam materials submitted to administrators. As we looked over his written work, she

commented that it is his “accent” on paper kept him from producing “A” work.” In that moment, it struck me that she too had re-categorized him as an English language learner.

Ironically, her re-categorization of Wisdom as an ELL learner did not change her level of engagement with him as a student. The conflict was resolved and both teacher and student continued to work together. Wisdom did begin to dedicate himself again to completing his homework and his readings. Strikingly, though, the benefits of his revelation and re-categorization were somewhat limited. Despite the teacher’s acknowledgement that Wisdom’s “accent” and second language background prevented him from achieving “A’s” in his written work, she did not provide the kind of close feedback to his writing that Wisdom desperately wanted and expected. Although Wisdom’s English grades (along with the teacher’s comments on his behavior) did improve, he was disappointed that he never managed to achieve the level of success that he had in middle school, both in terms of grades and writing. It is these questions of grades, writing instruction, and feedback that I turn to in the following chapter.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have used Tajfel and Turner’s concept of social identity to examine the construction of English language learners’ identities at Mill River North High School. I have argued how institutional labels and categories created by academic tracking and special programs like “ELL” often unintentionally lead to the establishment of social groups and hierarchies among the students and their peers. I then examined more closely how the students in this study understood those groups and hierarchies, looking first at their perceptions of the tracked classes and their desire to move up the track, both

academically and socially, and second, by looking at their sense of what it means to an “English language learner” in their school.

To that end, this chapter took a closer look at what it meant to be identified as an “English language learner” at Mill River North and South. I shared how the students perceived the label of “ELL.” I argued that the label of “ELL” was often constructed as a deficit by the school culture and the students themselves. Depictions in the school newspaper and concerns over school-wide performance and standardized testing often contributed to those kinds of negative constructions, leading to a prevailing sense that “being ELL” was a negative social identity. The students voiced concerns over a deficit model that characterized them as “stupid” and unintelligent. My findings then showed how the students in my study internalized, resisted, and reclaimed their “ELL identity,” depending on their social and academic needs.

In the end, the nature of being an English language learner is dynamic, never static. It shifts and reshapes depending on context and individual need. As English language learners adapt and gain more English proficiency, their identities shift in that process. They become more confident users of the English language. But their identities also shift as a result of circumstance and context. In some cases, if the “ELL category” is desirable, the students are more likely to align themselves with it. However, in other cases, if the ELL category is seen as more negative, than the students are more likely to reject it. These cases of rejection and alignment are fluid and ever-changing. Individual students may reject and reclaim their “ELL identities” multiple times on a given day. Even those students, like Wisdom, who no longer see themselves as “ELL” may find themselves realigning to that label in certain academic predicaments. It is this shifting

nature of “being ELL” that becomes the backdrop to the following chapters as I pick up the academic literacy strand of this study by examining the consequences of “being ELL” in the classroom and on the written page.

## CHAPTER VI

### **NOTEBOOKS, NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, AND WRITING INSTRUCTION: REINSCRIBING THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF 'ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' IN THE CLASSROOM**

At the end of the school year, the students left me their English and ELL notebooks. Each notebook with a different colored cover carries with it the mark of its owner. The margins of Therese's notebook show the inner life of her classroom moments, comments to friends written in Spanish, an intermittent question in English, and the occasional flower connected to the name of a love interest. Ken's notebook is an orange binder, meticulously kept; each page is perfectly organized with tight, black-inked print and indented margins. Towards the front of the binder, Ken has placed a laminated English Grammar Tips handout purchased from the local bookstore. Miguel's notebook is organized into sections: grammar, literature, writing, and vocabulary—an organizational technique he picked up from his teachers. In the early months, September to November, his notes are color-coded, with various shades of red, green, blue, and black. Papers, including old tests with teacher's comments and grades, a short, love note from a girlfriend, half-finished assignments are crammed in throughout the weathered pages.

As I thumb through, I am struck by the pages upon pages of writing that exists in these wire-bound, worn notebooks. Each page meticulously displays the students' attentiveness to board notes and teacher's direction. The notebooks, so marked with each student's mark of his/her identity, provide an inner look into the kinds of academic genres that are prominent in their English and ELL classes, and the instructional writing

practices that these students experience in those settings. As I begin this chapter, I start with the example of these notebooks because they serve as archives of the moments where classroom writing instruction and a student's social identity can mesh together on the page.

In the previous chapter, I explored how students' social identities are often constructed, in part, by institutional academic labels, and how students both accept and resist those labels, as they try to move toward more advantageous social identities. By looking at the experiences of Ken, Therese, Wisdom, Paul and Miguel, I have argued that social identity of "being ELL" can often be depicted as broad, monolithic grouping that may be construed as negative and deficient by the students. In this chapter, I argue that curricular practices in the teaching of writing can often re-inscribe a student's social identity. I take up the curricular piece of this study, by examining the instructional consequences of "being ELL" at the Mill River High Schools and considering how writing instruction can underscore students' social identities. Drawing upon my data, I make the case that the students' experiences with writing curricula—in this case, curricula that emphasized "survival genres" and rhetorical writing instruction—can re-inscribe these students' social identities as vulnerable, deficient, and marginalized members of the school community.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the underlying emphasis of "survival" in the content of the classrooms and the concerns of the teachers. I define what I see as "survival genres"—those genres geared toward surviving daily academic life and surviving the tests. In particular, I discuss examples of these genres, including the five-paragraph essay, to explore how the overwhelming emphasis on these genres in the

curriculum are influenced by the pressures of high-stakes testing, the No Child Left Behind act, and concern over the academic vulnerability of English language learners. In the second part of the chapter, I look closely at the students' experiences with arhetorical writing instruction—that is, writing instruction that focuses on form and procedure and is absent of any rhetorical considerations such as audience, genre, or purpose. Specifically, I examine the arhetorical nature of writing assignments, procedures and teacher response, and I argue that these instructional practices can reemphasize the second language students' roles as outsiders by not allowing them to participate in writing as a reflective, intellectually engaging, and communicative practice.

### **Survival 101: Second Language Writers in an Age of Assessment**

#### **Local schools receive failing grade**

HARTFORD, CT -- More than one third of the state's 806 elementary and middle schools -- including 32 locally -- failed to reach new, tougher standards under the federal No Child Left Behind law, according to figures released today. [...] Schools must not only raise proficiency of all students, but are cited if any one subgroup, such as low-income, black, Hispanic, English-language learners or students receiving special education, fail to reach the same proficiency standard. (Linda Connor Lambeck, Connecticut Post Online, August 25, 2006.)

#### **Nearly 1 in 5 Mass. schools not making adequate yearly progress**

BOSTON, MA - Nearly 19 percent of the state's public schools have failed to progress enough for at least two straight years toward meeting federal No Child Left Behind standards[...] The [Department of Education] identified 316 elementary, middle and high schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting federal goals for at least two years [...] Another 301 schools have specific groups, such as black, Hispanic, low-income or special education students, that must improve, compared with 222 last year. (Melissa Trujillo, Associated Press, September 12, 2006).

Every September, the headlines of newspapers like the ones above across the United States report on the local schools' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and testing results.

Inevitably, these reports include a sentence in these reports that notes the improvement or lack of improvement of the subgroup designated “English language learners.” Under NCLB, school districts must separate the testing data they conduct in order to account for the progress of “subgroups” in their schools.<sup>24</sup> But since the inception of NCLB and the state-mandated testing requirement, the question of who is “Limited English Proficient” (LEP) and who isn’t has remained a hazy question with conflicting answers. According to the U.S. Department of Education,

The NCLB definition of a limited English proficient student gives states flexibility in defining the students who constitute the LEP subgroup. For example, a state has the flexibility to define narrowly the LEP subgroup as only those students receiving direct, daily LEP services. A state could also define the group more broadly to include both students receiving direct services and students being monitored based on their achievement on academic assessments. (Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Education)

But that “flexibility in defining the students who constitute” as English language learners has led to much confusion and concern when it comes to identifying and labeling these students in the school. Students, like Wisdom and Paul, who are no longer enrolled in ELL classes and who no longer see themselves in the ELL category academically, are often renamed “ELL” when it comes to reporting testing data.<sup>25</sup> Since schools must report improvement in the subgroup categories, keeping high-achieving second language

---

<sup>24</sup> School classification policies and their curriculum are increasingly driven by fears of being classified as an underperforming school, and by unrealistic pressures to test all English Language Learners on state-mandated tests in the year or two following their arrival in the United States. Under current provisions, schools may continue to classify students as English language learners up two years after they have reached full English language proficiency. (U.S. Department of Education).

<sup>25</sup> There have debates throughout the country about how long a student can be designated ELL when reporting the data from the test results. Some states and local districts have complained that they don’t get enough credit for helping ELL students achieve when they cannot report “former ELL students” in their data. Unlike the other subgroups, the subgroup of LEP is theoretically always in shift, gaining and losing members as students develop English skills. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “It is a classification that changes as a student gains language proficiency” (Fact Sheet, Department of Education).



students as part of the English language learning subgroup helps to boost the school's achievement data.

I share the headlines and this discussion on the LEP subgroup for two reasons: (1) to provide a sense of the educational climate and the very public scrutiny under which teachers, students, and schools operate, and (2) to show how much the question of “ELL” identity is at the heart of state-mandated testing and achievement reports. This kind of educational climate can shape how English language learners identify themselves and their place in the wider school community, often characterizing these students as underachieving, vulnerable and intellectually challenged. But this climate of assessment can also drive, and sometimes limit, the kinds of writing instruction that are made available to second language students, because the focus remains on those genres, forms, and procedures that are needed to pass the test, rather than on the critical thinking and rhetorical skills they will need as successful academic writers and participatory citizens. These external pressures, along with the curriculum that exists as a result, can re-inscribe the students' social identities as marginalized, vulnerable, and rhetorically-challenged individuals.

At Mill River North and South, the ELL teachers were particularly conscious of the academic obstacles in the paths of their second language students—obstacles like standardized tests, mid-term and final exams, ability tracking, college entrance exams, and placement tests that did not take into account the students' cognitive abilities and talents, but instead penalized them (and their teachers and schools) for inaccuracy in their English language use or their unfamiliarity with academic norms and reader expectations. The ELL students had a limited amount time to “catch up” to native-English speaking

peers. Under NCLB, ELL students in many states are allowed a maximum of 2 years before they must take the tests, alongside their native-English speaking peers, despite the fact that most research on second language acquisition suggests that it can often 5-7 years for students to master high-level proficiency in academic English. The students in the study had a limited amount of time to gain academic literacy and to be able to perform the academic tasks (and tests) that were required of all students. The ELL teachers saw students with tremendous potential and talents, but the race was on to give the students the academic survival skills they would need in order to get them to a point where they would have the opportunity to showcase those talents and ideas. And the clock was ticking. For the students in this study, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade assessment test, along with the junior year writing examination, was just around the bend and that pressure, both in the ELL and English classrooms, often drove the kinds of writing and writing instruction that Wisdom, Therese, Ken, Paul, and Miguel experienced during their freshman year.

George Hillocks, author of *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*, has argued that under federal and state testing mandates, it is “writing assessment [that] drives instruction. It stipulates the kinds the kinds of writing that should be taught; it sets the standards for what counts as good writing; and it sets the conditions under which students must demonstrate their proficiency, and as a result, sets out what students learn” (64). At a school like Mill River North, which has been at the frontlines of this kind of public scrutiny, it should be of little surprise that this high-stakes atmosphere shaped how teachers approach the education of second language students and the kinds of writing instruction that took precedence in the English and ELL classrooms.

*Survival* drove the curriculum and the kinds of writing instruction that the students in my study encountered in their classrooms.

### **The Prevalence of Survival Genres**

*Survival genres* are genres that secondary school students must master in order to succeed in the high school setting and to demonstrate proficiency/mastery of skills on high-stakes testing that is required of them. I use the term *survival genres*, because instructionally, they are viewed as the “very basics” that students need to pass the tests, and for students like those in this study, these *survival genres* represent the keys to opening academic gates, such as those to higher education, that might otherwise be closed to them. The genres include those curricular genres that are directly linked to classroom instruction and class-based activities. In this study, they are the genres (i.e. five-paragraph essay) that dominate the students’ writing experiences in ELL and lower-level academic tracks, but they are also found throughout the secondary school curriculum. These genres demonstrate knowledge of a concept or a form, independent of rhetorical functions. In the most urgent of circumstances, survival genres are those forms that students need to know in order to negotiate high school policies and to complete their day-to-day homework assignments (i.e. writing sentences to demonstrate knowledge of a new term or grammar rule). In the classroom, these genres often are geared toward preparing students for the questions and writing tasks found on standardized tests—at the school level (i.e. mid-term/final exams), at the state level (i.e. state-mandated assessment tests), and at the college level (i.e., college entrance exams, placement tests).

In Table 6.1, I have provided a brief overview of the some of the survival genres constituted the bulk of the students’ academic writing throughout the year.

**Table 6.1 The Survival Genres**

Genre	Textual Features	Curricular Context	Sample Student Texts and Assignments
<b>Vocabulary sentences</b>	<p>Single, independent sentences. One sentence written for each vocabulary word.</p> <p>Often 10-20 sentences were assigned for homework each week.</p> <p>Topics of sentences are independent and disconnected from one another.</p>	<p>In both ELL and mainstream English classes, student copied new vocabulary, along with part of speech and definition, off the board and into their notebooks. Students then had to compose single sentences that used the new vocabulary term and conveyed the correct use of the term. In English class, the new vocabulary was often influenced by literary texts and conventions. In ELL class, these assignments were based on high-frequency vocabulary.</p>	<p>"I avoided our neighbor because of her <u>stealth</u>." (Wisdom, English)</p> <p>"She knows what a <u>pang</u> of heart feels like because she had it before." (Ken, English)</p> <p>"I am <u>doting</u> on music." (Ken, English)</p>
<b>Single-sentence responses</b>	<p>Single sentence, written in response to a prompt.</p> <p>Emphasis on capitalization and end punctuation.</p> <p>Emphasis on demonstrating knowledge of concept or reading.</p>	<p>In ELL class, these sentences were often in response to workbook prompts and asked students to demonstrate their understanding of English grammar and sentence structures/formations.</p> <p>In English, these single sentence responses were often in response to questions about a literary text the class was reading.</p>	<p>A. Do you come to school everyday? (Textbook item) B: <u>Yes, I do. I came to class everyday.</u> (Therese's response, ELL class)</p> <p>Who does LaVaughn [in <i>Make Lemonade</i> by Virgina Woolf] call to ask for help? (Teacher's question) <u>She calls her friends.</u> (Miguel's response, English class)</p>
<b>Single Paragraph</b>	<p>Topic sentence, followed by 4-5 supporting ideas.</p> <p>Topic sentences conveys the controlling idea and the supporting sentences provide the details and examples.</p>	<p>In ELL class, explicit instruction on paragraph form.</p> <p>In English class, discussions on the paragraph as part of larger discussion on the five-paragraph essay. Emphasis on paragraph form, including indentation and number of sentences.</p>	<p>Excerpt from "Writing Another Paragraph" assignment (Ken, ELL class)</p> <p>Possible topics include the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What types of music do you like the most – either from your first country or from any other countries?</li> <li>Discuss your favorite singer and the kinds of music he or she plays. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not forget a left and a right margin (10 points for each)</li> <li>Do not forget to indent. (10 points)</li> <li>Do not forget a topic sentence and a concluding sentence. (10 and 10)</li> <li>Try to use a variety of verbs. (10 points)</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be careful when you choose a tense. Remember, for what you <b>usually do</b> or <b>usually think</b>= <b>simple present</b>. If it is something that talks about <b>only this year</b>=<b>present progressive</b>. (20 points).</li> <li>• Include details; that is what makes it interesting. (10 points).</li> </ul>
<b>Excused Absence Letter</b>	<p>Formal letter</p> <p>Form includes: Greeting, Body Closing</p>	<p>In the beginner-intermediate level ELL class, students discussed school policies and wrote formal letters to the principal in their parents' voice, excusing them from an absence or tardy.</p> <p>Body of the text was provided by the teacher.</p>	<p>October 29, 200__</p> <p>Mr. Pedro Mansada 212 Pepper Street, Apt. 2 Mill River, USA 02222</p> <p>Dear Mr. Smith,</p> <p>Last Friday 10/24 and Monday, 10/26, my son Leo was absent because he was sick. His student I.D. number is 555 and his homeroom is 15. Please call if you have any questions. My phone number is 555-5555.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Pedro Mansada (Therese, ELL class)</p>
<b>The Five-Paragraph Essay</b>	<p>See extended discussion on p. 158.</p>	<p>Taught in Intermediate-Advanced ELL and English Levels 1 and 2. Emphasis on form.</p> <p>Often written in response to literature in the ELL classroom or an issue (like Ken's Racism essay shown in Chapter 4).</p> <p>In English classes, it was used for writing responses to literature and for compare/ contrast or descriptive assignments.</p>	<p>See Figure 5.2 (Paul, English class)</p>

Though, I will be discussing only two of these genres at length, I provide Table 6.1 in order to give readers a clearer sense of the range of survival genres that I identified during my data collection and analysis. Briefly, this table points to the textual features of the genre, the curricular context in which it was assigned and used, its function in terms of academic survival, and some samples of the genre from my student participants.

For the most part, however, the first three genres in this table represent the kinds of writing assignments that dominated much of the academic writing that Miguel, Wisdom, Paul, Ken and Therese completed in their ELL and English classrooms. Some of the genres were taught for the immediate survival of newcomers, like the fourth genre in the table, the excused absence letter, which I will now discuss at length in order to show the kinds of ways that these genres were important to the academic survival and how the teaching of these genres can be influenced by pressures outside of the teachers' control.

Let me start by setting the rhetorical context for the genre, the excused absence letter. The assignment was introduced in Therese and Miguel's beginner-intermediate level ELL class and was part of a larger unit that had students write out, literally copy into their notebooks, pages upon pages of the school's student handbook. The objective was to learn about the school rules, and the unit was one that had been mandated by the administration which was concerned that ELL students were not familiar with the school rules. In many ways, this was a legal issue. In the past, administrators had found that it was difficult to suspend English language learners for infractions, because the school code of conduct was not translated into all home languages spoken by its diverse

population. As a result, ELL teachers were forced to include the handbook in their class curriculum for weeks and at the cost of crucial instruction time for teachers and students.

The teachers tried to salvage this class time by creating language development assignments around this administrative directive. One way that they attempted to do this resulted in the excused absence letter assignment. In Miguel and Therese's ELL class, the teacher had students practice the formal letter genre by way of writing sample letters addressed to administrators to excuse absences or early dismissals, part of the conduct code policy on absences, that their non-English speaking/writing parents could later sign if needed. The formal excused absence letter was a way to include some writing into the curriculum, but it was also a way to ensure that students would have the necessary genre and language for such a letter, should they need it. The reality was that missing class or school without parental permission could result in detention and suspension for these students, and teachers were trying to give the students the tools to protect them from that scenario. At Mill River North, three unexcused absences from a class resulted in an administrative failure that could jeopardize the students' entire high school education.

We might ask about the administrative rationale for requiring such an emphasis on the student handbook in the ELL classroom. This question leads us back to issues of the second language students and their social identities in the school settings. The demand from the administration that the ELL curriculum include more explicit coverage of the student handbook, the school rules, and the consequences for breaking the rules insinuated in the students' eyes that English language learners were "troublemakers" and "slackers," images that Wisdom, Miguel, and the other students in the study desperately resisted. Furthermore, the letter writing activity, along with the copious copying of rules

from the handbook, reinscribed a sense that English language learners were very vulnerable, and sometimes hostile, members of the school community that concerned the administration. It was a message that Miguel, for one, internalized. When he ran into problems with his former friends and found himself getting jumped near school grounds, a story I related in the previous chapter, his first concern was that he would be labeled as an aggressive, troublemaking Latino, “one who broke rules” in his words.

And although the letter writing activity may have provided for an interesting critical discussion on writing, power, and language, the writing instruction that surrounded the letter activity never really engaged students beyond the form. In fact, the students copied the body of the letter from the teacher’s example. The emphasis was on survival, and the letter writing assignment became more about negotiating what English language learners needed to endure the school’s attendance policies and having the necessary template than about learning to write as critical and rhetorically savvy thinkers.

I admit that this letter as a survival genre may be indicative of this particular institutional context—it is indeed a rather quirky assignment—and it may seem atypical, but every context will have some sort of atypical assignments that highlights the issues and concerns with a genre. So I’ve selected an additional example that is more typical of these kinds of academic survival genres to share.

Vocabulary sentences were less about negotiating school policies and more about negotiating common classroom-base genres and high stakes testing. The students told me that they spent a great deal of their homework time devoted to creating these kinds of sentences in many of their classes (from Science to English to Civics). The genre, as I observed it in English and ELL classrooms, served two purposes: (1) to prepare students



for assigned readings, and (2) to prepare them for the kinds of vocabulary that appeared on the SAT and the state tests. The vocabulary sentences, along with fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises, served to prepare students for the verbal and reading sections of various tests that they would encounter, including the 10<sup>th</sup> grade state-mandated tests and the SAT. For example, in the new SAT writing component, a large portion of the final score is based upon a multiple-choice section in which students must identify the grammar and usage errors in a given sentence or improve upon the language of a given sentence or paragraph. Similar kinds of multiple-choice test items exist throughout state-level tests, mandated under No Child Left Behind. Since test items are often heavily decontextualized, it should be no great surprise that the writing instruction that surrounds these discussions on sentence structure, verb tenses, and paragraphs form are also decontextualized and vacant of real audiences, real genres, and real communicative practice.

I observed that the vocabulary sentence assignment looked similar across the students' different classrooms. In each case, students were given a list of vocabulary words, teachers usually went through the definitions with the students, often writing the definitions up on the board. Students copied down the words and their definitions from the board. Then teachers assigned students to write sentences using the vocabulary words—one sentence for each word. Each sentence was completely unrelated to the next sentence, and students struggled to capture the words' meanings "in their own words." For Miguel, the vocabulary sentences were a real struggle. His second English teacher at Mill River South explained that Miguel often had difficulty completing these assignments, and in his notebook, particularly as the year went by, I found half-finished

vocabulary sentences and similar assignments unfinished. In Table 6.1 that I presented earlier, I have provided sample sentences from Ken and Wisdom. In the examples, Ken and Wisdom reflect their confusion about how to use these new words effectively and they write circular sentences that seek to hide their lack of understanding, like the sentences on “stealth” or “pang” seen above. The students told me that they approached these sentences with boredom and frustration. To add to this sense of apathy, the teachers rarely corrected or responded to the sentences, and students were unsure if they had successfully captured the words’ meanings or not. The writing assignment was completely decontextualized from start to finish. As the year went by, the students told me that the assignments quickly became a “blow-off” assignment, one that they copied, shared, or commiserated over during study hall with classmates.

As I worked with the students, one of the first things I discovered was that the number of lengthier writing assignments (anything from one page or more) that students were assigned was limited. In fact, note-taking activities and single sentence responses were the mainstay of academic writing for all the students in both ELL and English classrooms. The only exceptions were the occasional in-class essay test on a book that the class had read and the five paragraph essay, which I discuss at length in the following section.

### **The Five-Paragraph Essay: The Ultimate Survival Genre**

*I help students write paragraphs, introductions, and conclusions in class so that they seem familiar with the 5-paragraph essay structure.*

- Mill River district English teacher, responding to a survey question on what is important in her writing instruction.

Criticism over the five-paragraph and its place in the high school curriculum has long been debated in the college composition circles and among high school English teachers. I want to begin this section by contextualizing some of the forces that drive the dominance of the five-paragraph essay in the high school setting. Complaints about the five-paragraph essay abound in composition literature, but I contend that in practices, the five-paragraph essay has become the ultimate survival genre for second language learners and their native-English speaking peers. In the writing experiences of Therese, Wisdom, Ken, Miguel, and Paul, the five-paragraph essay remained the predominate genre for explicit writing instruction. In fact, for most of the students, it was the only genre that studied and practiced with any consistency throughout the year. The five-paragraph essay remains the key that opens many of the gates set up by state-mandated testing, college entrance exams, and college placement tests. It has, in fact, become a necessary genre that these students have to demonstrate in order to do well on state-mandated exams, to score high on the SAT, and to demonstrate writing competence on college placement tests (in order to place out of remedial classes). And teachers know it. Consider Hugh Thomas McCracken's recent letter to *English Journal*:

Why do [teachers] hammer away at the five-paragraph theme? My answer is my second question, a rhetorical one: Why isn't the five paragraph theme the "perfect" answer to the "perfect test"? Faced with state intrusion into their classrooms and curricula, an intrusion that is one-dimensional in its control and distorts the complexity of teaching and learning, teachers have a useful weapon at hand in the five-paragraph them and they know it.  
(10)

In the Mill River School District, the importance of the five-paragraph essay was underscored by my survey of English teachers, who overwhelming noted the importance of

thesis statement, supporting paragraphs, and writing the five-paragraph essay as the one of the most important things that all students needed to know about academic writing. For example, one teacher wrote in her comments that students should be able to establish “clarity of thesis and being able to adequately support that thesis in a well-developed essay.” Another English teacher noted that the two most important elements that students should learn about academic writing were “how to develop and express a clear and precise thesis” and “how to organize their thoughts in a way that will effectively present their defense of their thesis.” When I surveyed my student participants at the end of the school year, they reported that most of their academic writing in both English and ELL classes had been focused on the five-paragraph essay. In fact, most of them reported that the key concepts that they had learned included: Introduction, Thesis Statement, Supporting ideas, and Conclusion. They reported that two most prominent genres that they encountered were the five-paragraph essay and “writing about readings,” an introductory version of literary analysis. In fact, my data collection revealed that the majority of their English and ELL assignments were thesis-driven essays and essay exams written in response to literature.

Thomas Nunnally, in “Breaking the Five Paragraph Theme Barrier,” has described the requirements of the genre of the five-paragraph as including:

(1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of the three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence in most models, and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points (67).

In Ken’s ELL classroom, I saw visual echoes of Nunnally’s definition of the genre. On one wall, a large poster is titled: **ESSAY REQUIREMENTS**. In bold, block print, it advised that all paragraphs should be indented, that the last sentence of the introductory

paragraph should be a *thesis statement* “that guides the reader with your paragraphs,” and that “each paragraph should have a topic sentence that is the guide to the paragraph.” The poster went on to suggest vocabulary that students might use to begin their introductory paragraphs, as well as advice and key words for writing a Conclusion (i.e., “in conclusion,” “in sum,” “refer to the thesis statement,” “give an opinion”). The principles of the five-paragraph theme were also visible in the emphasis on single-paragraph instruction that was prevalent in the other ELL classrooms.

But in English classes as well, the five-paragraph essay form was also the predominant genre and form. For example, Paul wrote a compare/contrast five-paragraph essay for his English class (see Figure 6.1). The topic of the paper, chosen by Paul, compared and contrasted two horror movie villains, Freddy Krueger and Jason. As an example of the five-paragraph essay, Paul’s sample exemplifies the instructional emphasis on form over content. Although Paul identified this essay as one of his favorite from the year, because of the subject matter (which he did get to choose himself), the essay remained remarkably short on details, this despite the fact that it was about his favorite movies and characters.

The essay itself reveals a regimented approach to the writing, similar to the other survival genres that I have previously discussed. Paul’s essay illustrates little sense of a broader audience, and he knows that his purpose is to meet the teacher’s objectives for the assignment.

Figure 6.1 Paul's compare and contrast essay for his English class.

**Freddy Krueger and Jason  
Compare/Contrast Essay**

→ Freddy and Jason: two of the most famous horror-movie characters. They both kill people, but there are some differences between them.

→ Freddy and Jason: two of the most famous horror-movie characters. They both kill ~~Freddy kidnapped and killed little children, building up his own kingdom of terror, when~~ *what in movies all they do* he was alive. The parents of his victims killed him by setting his home, along with him, on fire. They took justice on their own hands. Then he began appearing in children's dreams, so that he wasn't forgotten in children's minds. Filling them with fear, obtaining his powers to hurt more children.

Jason, on the other hand, died when he was eleven years old. He was drowned in Crystal Lake at ~~Summer Camp~~. His mother, who is in hell, won't let him die. That's why he's invincible.

→ Freddy appears in children's dreams turning them into nightmare; but he can also appear in real life; that's how he begins killing more children. He can also use his victim's bodies and use them by just appearing in their dreams and making an illusion he's being swallowed by them. That's one way he can appear in real life. It's so weird...

→ Jason and Freddy have their own powers and killing instruments. Jason uses a machete, but I've also seen him using a chain saw. Freddy uses razor blades attached to a glove that he wears. In the movie "Freddy vs. Jason" you can tell the difference between their powers and how they give an advantage. In the movie, when Freddy appears in one of

Jason's dreams, Freddy has ~~so~~ much advantage. He can use about anything that comes to his mind as a weapon. Unfortunately for Freddy, Jason doesn't seem to get hurt at all and he just won't die. Jason chops off one of Freddy's arms but he just regenerates. It's ridiculous.

→ When Freddy appears right in front of Jason in real life, Jason has a major advantage. Jason's stronger and Freddy cannot regenerate himself when his arm is chopped off. In the end both of them seem to be immortal.

→ In conclusion I think that although both of them having different powers and disadvantages Freddy wins psychologically because he can easily manipulate Jason, who I think wins physically.

A - great compare/contrast

As a result of those objectives, Paul builds his case for comparing and contrasting the two villains, one paragraph at a time. I should note here that Paul was a very gifted writer,

who enjoyed playing with his style and writing stories. He was also one of the most proficient English writers in my study and he enjoyed using his expansive English vocabulary when he wrote, a trait that is on display in this essay. Yet despite that strong vocabulary, his essay on Freddy Krueger and Jason is remarkably staid and unadventurous. His descriptions provide some details, but a great deal is left unsaid. For example, he never references the movies that the characters came from or provides a timeline or sense of setting. For a reader unfamiliar with these villains or the horror movie genre, this essay would be difficult to read and understand.

But Paul has mastered the form and the conventions of the five-paragraph essay. When Paul talked about his essay, it became apparent how much he had internalized the expectations of the five-paragraph essay and its form. In our discussions, Paul did not provide me with the gory details of the two killers and their prey, or provide captivating details on how the two villains stacked up in the movie he saw. Instead, when he talked about his essay, he emphasized the form over the content, walking me through his procedure:

At first I compared how they died. In the second paragraph I wrote on how they were killed. [...] And then in the next [paragraph] how are they strong.

His teacher's comments were also positive, stressing the Paul's "creativity" with his choice of topics and pointing out the need to indent paragraphs—again, the focus on form. For Paul, his teacher's positive comments about the essay and its "creativity" furthered Paul's sense of confidence when it came to this genre. He had learned the form well, and his teacher's comments, along with an A letter grade, cemented the impression in his mind that following this form was the key to success in academic writing. But the



retorical nature of writing was completely absent from his writing experiences with this essay. He was simply mastering the form, and for a student like Paul with so much promise and determination, he did not know that he was missing out on a far richer understanding of writing that would serve him well in the future.

### **Implications of Survival Genres on Students in terms of Social Identity**

In their work on genre analysis, Carol Berkenkotter and Tom Huckin, among others, have advocated for teachers to explicitly teach certain curricular genres to children who are outside the mainstream. In their chapter titled “Suffer the Little Children: Learning Curriculum Genres of School and University,” Berkenkotter and Huckin express concern over children who are “are less prepared to handle the genres of didactic instruction than are so-called ‘mainstream children’” (152). For those children who home languages and communities may be outside the ‘mainstream,’ like the second language writers in this study, Berkenkotter and Huckin suggest that teachers have an obligation to explicitly teach the curricular genres that these students will need to survive and demonstrate competence. As Berkenkotter and Huckin asked in their chapter, “What are the socio-cognitive implications of teachers ignoring the genre conventions that children and adolescents must master in public schools and universities to demonstrate communicative competence?” (153).

As I think the experiences of the students in my study with survival genres, I wonder about the relationship between “the genre conventions that children and adolescents must master” and “communicative competence.” Berkenkotter and Huckin rightfully note that the classroom genres are “real genres” when it comes to the school setting, and students outside of the mainstream must be introduced to the curricular

genres that are needed in school. Lisa Delpit makes a similar argument in her landmark essay, "Teaching Other People's Children." As much as I understand that argument, I question how these genres, and solely these genres, prepare non-mainstream students for "communicative competence." Increasingly, "the genres that children and adolescents must master" in the classroom are prescribed by the tests they must take, rather than the critical thinking and communicative skills they need to participate in the world around them. The students in this study may have mastered the survival genre forms that they needed to demonstrate for the tests and in their classrooms, but they were rarely asked to reach beyond mastering the genre form or to question its rhetorical positioning. Teachers, in this study, were giving these "non-mainstream students" what they needed to show some semblance of communicative competence on the tests, but were the students really gaining communicative skills, particularly when these genres remain so arhetorical—without audience, without purpose, without a writer's intent? The problem with survival genres that the students in this study encountered was not that they were part of the writing curriculum; it was that they were the mainstay of the curriculum. In some cases, they were the only writing curriculum. The emphasis on survival genres prepared these students to meet the objectives of the tests, but not to become competent and communicative writers beyond the tests. Amy Devitt, in her review of Berknkotter and Huckin's work, has noted that there are hard, difficult questions that need to be asked about teaching genres, particularly "genre's power to inhibit as well as enable writers and readers" (613). In reality, the emphasis on these genres, particularly the five-paragraph essay, inhibited and limited second language students' participation in writing as

communicative practice and process, furthering their stance as outsiders when it came to communicating with the mainstream world that they wished to be a part of.

The curricular genres, like the survival genres I detailed here, often fail to operate in the way that most rhetorical genres do, because they are essentially arhetorical without a true sense of audience and a blurred sense of purpose. They are pragmatic and designed only to meet what “target-situation demands” (Brenesch 162). Sarah Brenesch, for her part, has raised similar concerns about writing instruction for second language writers. She takes issue with writing instruction that insists on pragmatism and “[argues] that a level of proficiency in L2 [second language] must be attained before students begin to question the status quo” or participate in higher-level, critical discussions on rhetoric and writing (162).<sup>26</sup> My discussion of survival genres has illustrated these kinds of pragmatic approaches and the problems that are inherent with those approaches. In the end, “pragmatism” and “teaching to the test” meant that the second language students in my study had only limited experiences with genres and their place in the rhetorical situation.

Amy Devitt, in *Writing Genres*, once noted the significant connections between genre and the rhetorical situation, writing: “genre entails purposes, participants, and themes, so understanding genres entail understanding the rhetorical situation and its social context” (7). When that social context and the rhetorical situation are lost from the

---

<sup>26</sup> Brenesch contends that “L2 writing instruction does not have to choose between pragmatism and critical teaching” (162). As she explains, “Target-situation demands and students’ right to challenge them can be simultaneously addressed in what Pennycook (1997) called ‘critical pragmatism.’ This is not a compromise position but a way to broaden the discussion of students’ needs to consider not only *what is* but *what might be*” (162). For my part, I believe that Brenesch’s argument has merit in the L2 writing context of college, but I acknowledge that the scope of her “critical pragmatism” approach is more difficult to achieve in the high school setting due to the political, time, and material constraints that exist. I do, however, believe that her call to “broaden the discussion” on student writing and to involve students in that discussion is an important one that has a place in the high school English and ELL classrooms.

conversations on writing and the genres that we teach, students miss out on the opportunity to fully engage in writing instruction that promotes writing as a critical thinking activity and as a communicative process. Those “missed opportunities” mean that second language students (and others) remain vulnerable and the very stage of educational disadvantage that the label of “ELL” insinuates.

In the next section of this chapter, I move beyond the question of survival genres and take up the problem of “arhetorical” writing instruction, by examining students’ experiences with a lockstep version of the writing process and the teachers’ responses to second language student writing.

### **Arhetorical Approaches to the Teaching of Writing**

*‘The current-traditional approach to writing instruction presents writing, not as a messy, recursive process, as “a neat linear progression: select, narrow, and amplify’ (Crowley). Assignments since they ignore rhetorical situations, often ask students to select a topic in which they are interested, organize their ideas, create a thesis statement, write an outline, and compose the draft—in exactly that sequence.*

- Gary Glau (74)

In *Theorizing Composition*, Gary Glau, in his discussion of current-traditional theory, defined “an arhetorical approach” to the teaching of writing as one “that removes considerations of audience, purpose, and so on from the composition”(73). In the field of composition, we often align these kinds of approaches to writing instruction closely with the current-traditional pedagogical method, one more concerned with the end-product than with the process. As Glau notes in the opening quote to this section, “the messy, recursive” process is often lost in the pursuit of “sequence” and order (74).

In my discussion of the five-paragraph essay, I have tried to show that some aspects of the current-traditional theory of composition are alive and thriving in U.S. secondary schools like Mill River. In part, this method is the “perfect weapon” as McCracken pointed out, to federal and state education policies that stress meeting tests’ objectives in a “one-size-fits-all” approach. But the teachers on the frontline of this battle are conflicted as well. In my survey of English teachers in the Mill River High Schools, many teachers wrote about being influenced by the writing process movement, but feeling the pressure to move toward more traditional approaches in the teaching of writing as of late. As the teachers explained:

I follow Will Strunk, E.B. White, and Peter Elbow. I believe a combination of traditional and progressive techniques, basically what works for the students you have.

- Mill River district English teacher

At one time, I was greatly influenced by the writing gurus [like] Nancy Atwell (In the Middle). I can’t say that anymore. I [...] return to the traditional method more and more these days.

- Mill River district English teacher

This “return to the traditional method” was particularly true of teachers working with students in the lower academic tracks, many of whom were second language writers. Many of these second language writers were often construed as being unable to handle more than “the basics” and as more academically deficient than the lowest-level academic track native-English speaker. As one English teacher explained in her survey response, “I feel [ESL students] need a lot more structure when being taught, even more than average Level 1 students.” And as another teacher noted, this time an ELL teacher, in her summary of strategies in teaching writing to second language writers: “Start with

fundamentals: grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. And then work upwards: sentence, paragraphing, etc.”

The push to return to the “basics” in these lower-level classes combined with a knowledge of writing process pedagogies often meant that the instruction on writing and the response to writing was a strange arhetorical, current-traditional concoction of the writing process. Almost all of the teachers in the survey responded that the Writing Process was an active part of their curriculum. But what most of the students in my study found was a writing process that was very lockstep and concentrated more on following the proper steps of the process than the messy, recursive process that was envisioned by compositionists like Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and Nancie Atwell. In fact, the writing process in these students’ experiences was so decontextualized, so procedural, so absent of revision strategies, and so lacking in conversation and discourse on writing strategies and techniques that the students were left with little understanding of how they might develop their skills as writers. In the following examples of students’ experiences, I will illustrate what these practices looked like in the classroom and in the students’ written work.

### **An Arhetorical Writing Process**

Although the Writing Process movement has a relatively established history in school classrooms in the United States, the concept of the writing process is often an unknown for many second language students coming into U.S. high schools. Only Wisdom, who had been in the U.S. for almost five years, longer than the other participants, had learned

about the Writing Process throughout sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade.<sup>27</sup> But for the other student participants, including Therese, Miguel, and Ken, who were more recent immigrants to the United States, the methods, meta-vocabulary, and expectations of the writing process, that students like Wisdom and many of his native-English peers know well, were foreign territory, completely disconnected to their prior writing experiences. As they learned about the writing process, the concepts when they were presented as rigid steps remained as decontextualized as the vocabulary sentences and fill-in-the-blank grammar homework exercises they completed in study hall. The notes on the writing process and the teacher's emphasis on following the "steps" did not provide for an engaging conversation on writing, its purpose, and its power. Instead, the students' encounters with the writing process were based on procedure and were indicative of low expectations of the students, rather than on helping students to develop skills in critical thinking and writing as an intellectual activity. To illustrate this concern, I will share Miguel's story.

Early in the fall of his freshman year, Miguel encountered the concept of "Writing Process" for the first time. During one of our meetings, Miguel flipped through his pages of notes, showing me proudly how much he copied from the board in his English class, and pointing proudly to the steps he had learned about writing. His notes, shown in Figure 6.2, outlined a four-step writing process including: brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising.

---

<sup>27</sup> In Wisdom's exit survey, he wrote that he has studied that concept of "Writing Process" in "6<sup>th</sup> grade, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade." Our discussions throughout the year revealed how steeped he was in the writing practices associated with "writing process"; he regularly referred to drafts and revisions in our conversations, and on one occasion, he proudly shared his 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolio, showing me his reflections on the writing assignments and offering me detailed comparisons of first draft and final draft samples. As the student with the most experiences in mainstream English classrooms, Wisdom's experiences as a student writer speak to the prominence of the writing process in his U.S. school experiences.

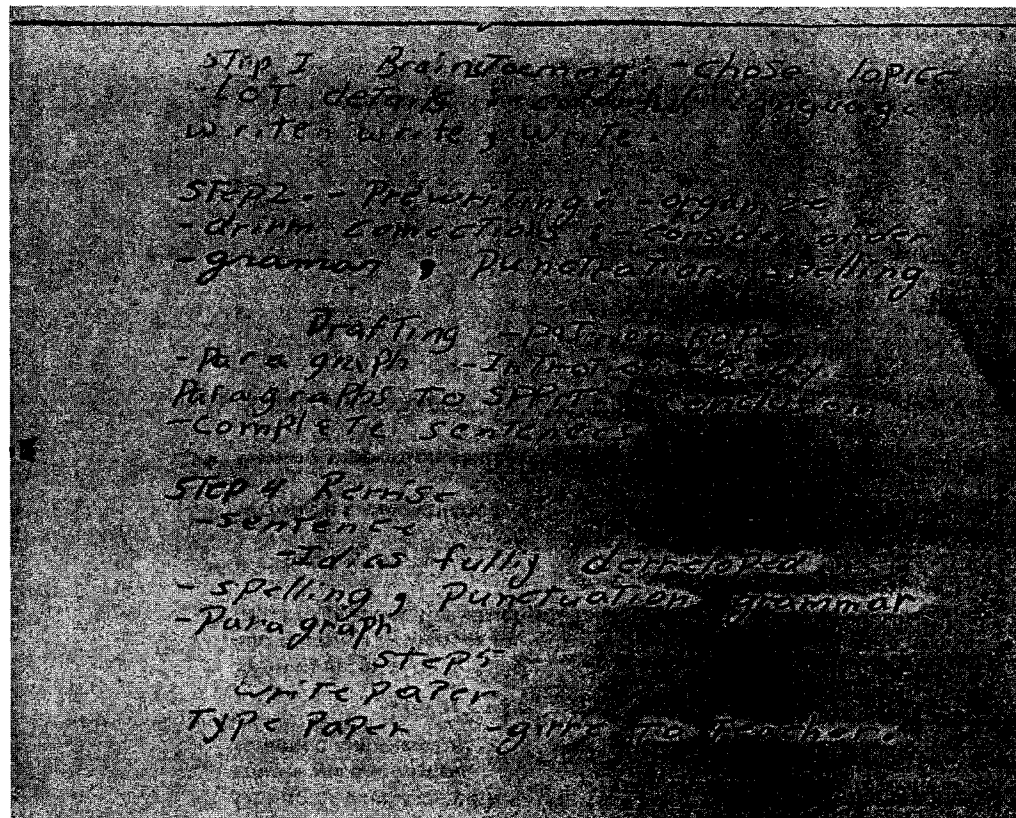
When I asked Miguel to tell me about these notes and what they meant for him as a writer, he replied, “Well, I don’t really know. Because she just put it on the board, and I copy. Because I don’t want to miss something.” He said that he copied the notes down, but that the teacher hadn’t explained the terms in great detail. In fact, there had been little conversation about the writing process, beyond naming the steps and the brief definitions that Miguel had copied into his notebook. Even as he spoke of the four steps, he hesitated as he tried to sound them out, referring to “drafting” as “draffing” and “revising” as “rerrising.” As we looked over the notes together and Miguel began to talk through them in an effort to explain them to me. As he explained:

Okay...let’s see. Step 1. Step 2. (pause) well...oh, this is about this stuff (points to a list of questions he created for an interview of another student)... oh, in this one [Step 3 Prewriting], they say one part that you don’t have to worry about spelling, you don’t have to worry about spelling...Here is d..dra...draffing. Oh – this is about the paragraphs – introduction, bodies – that’s were you have to put that stuff. [...] In this one [Step 4 revising], you need to worry on spelling and that.

As he talked about his notes and the process of writing, it became clear that these concepts were somewhat empty for Miguel. As we talked about the steps, he noted that prewriting was when you didn’t have to worry about spelling and revising was when you did. Drafting was about the paragraphs—“the introduction and the bodies.” For Miguel, writing had been distilled into these steps that he followed without any real sense of how this list contributed to his writing, much like the fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises he worked in ESL class, except he felt that those grammar exercises were more useful.



Figure 6.2 Miguel's notes on the Writing Process from his mainstream English class.



I want to add here that these steps were not just put up on the board and left there.

The English teacher did have students do a writing assignment that attempted to have students try out the process but the assignment reflected what Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford have called “a rigid stage model” (252). The assignment was one in which students composed biographies about fellow students in the class. The teacher’s assignment had students brainstorm questions. The students then interviewed a fellow student and wrote out their responses under each of the questions. This was part of prewriting, according to Miguel. Then students were told to create a diagram, placing information from the interview into categories—like biographical, things they like to do, etc. (See Figure 6.3). Miguel explained that this was part of drafting. When we met for our interview, Miguel explained that he was at the “drafting part” of the process.



When it came time to “revise” for the final draft of the essay, the extent of that revision was minimal. First, Miguel typed up his earlier draft. In the typed version, he also added to his statement of purpose, As Miguel wrote in his final draft, the purpose of the assignment was, in part, to “practice [sic] using the writing process to practice writing a 5-paragraph essay.” His statement of purpose provides a clearer view into the mix of current-traditional/writing process pedagogy that prompted this kind of assignment and underscored the prevailing instructional philosophy.

Other than those minor changes, Miguel’s final draft showed few significant revisions on either the local or global level. On a local level, his final draft showed that he was still neglecting capitalization, still unclear about sentence endings and beginnings, still unsure of the use of commas, still struggling with spelling and vocabulary, and still struggling with paragraph development—all of which ironically made up the majority of his homework and classwork—those survival genres—in his ELL class. On a more global level, there were elements of strong narrative apparent in paragraph four, but he never realized that he might have developed that paragraph further to establish a richer, more engaging text. Indeed, Miguel was never part of any conversations on writing that might have helped him to develop those goals as a writer. In our discussions, he didn’t seem aware that there were other possibilities for developing the essay further.

This effort to simplify writing instruction meant that the classroom discourse on writing was almost nonexistent. Miguel had no idea that he might set goals as a writer, analyze a rhetorical situation, or consider an audience. Although his English teacher did provide active discourse on the literature the students read, the classroom discourse on writing was limited. Beyond the steps of the five-paragraph essay and the steps of the writing process, most of the

students did not experience any rich discourse on invention, revision, or rhetorical situations, etc. There were very few engaged opportunities to talk about the work that writing did or could do. As Martin Nystrand has argued in his work on the importance of classroom discourse:

Ultimately the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher-students interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious epistemic roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understandings.[...] most schooling is organized [...] for the plodding transmission of information through classroom recitation. Teachers talk and students listen. And the lower the track, we found, the more likely this is true. (7, 3)

In comparison, Miguel's English teacher and many of the other students' English teachers, all teaching in the lower-level tracks, were very adept at building this type of discourse when it came to literature.<sup>28</sup> The students seemed engaged when they spoke

---

<sup>28</sup> The English notebooks of all five student participants highlighted a curriculum with an emphasis on literature. Pages upon pages of notes dedicated to Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Homer's *Odyssey* (excerpts), and young adult novels, like Woolf's *Make Lemonade*. Overwhelmingly the notes referred to literary terms and conventions. There are definitions of words like: setting, plot, point of view, and narrator. There are notes on the kinds of conflict that exist in literature, i.e., man vs. nature, man vs. man, man vs. self. There are notes and outlines that describe the plot lines, characters, settings, and scenes of various readings that students encounter throughout the school year. In her essay on "The Truth of High School," high school teacher Milka Mustenikova Mosley has explained the emphasis of high school English classes, noting that:

It is important for college educators to understand that our English classes are not composition classes, but are surveys of literature classes, mainly surveys of different genres of literature, but also surveys of World Literature, American Literature, and British Literature. We also cover study skills, grammar, and vocabulary.[...] Just like the students, high school English teachers have conform to and cover the curriculum approved by our school boards because everything we do is closely monitored by standardized testing (61, 60).

In the teacher survey that I circulated with English teachers at Mill River North and South, teachers revealed a similar focus on literature over literacy. I asked: "What are the most important things that students should know about writing for academic purposes?" The answers from the teachers reiterate my sense that a literature-focus, rather than a literacy focus, dominated the English curriculum. One teacher responded, "Students should be able to analyze and interpret literature for their writing." Another teacher wrote, "I [...] adapt one of my college textbooks: *Writing about Literature*." Another commented, "My [writing] topics are usually generated from the stories in our textbook." In the same survey, another English teacher differentiated between "writing classes" and "non-writing" classes, explaining, "In non-writing classes, there tends to be a lot in the curriculum [to cover in the course of the year.] Teachers/students may

about their readings, the characters and plotlines they were studying, and the literary conventions that they learned as part of their discussions. Although students often discussed the literary genres that they were reading, they did not discuss the writing or rhetorical genres that existed with the same level of depth or enthusiasm. When it came to writing, those kinds of critical conversations dropped off the map. Following form and procedure was the bulk of classroom discussion on writing, and there was little discourse or teacher-student interaction on strategies for revision, ways to understand an audience's needs, or the purposes of a given writing assignment. The result of this lack of discourse mirrors Nystrand's findings that "the students [were] unable to respond except on a superficial, procedural level." As Nystrand continues,

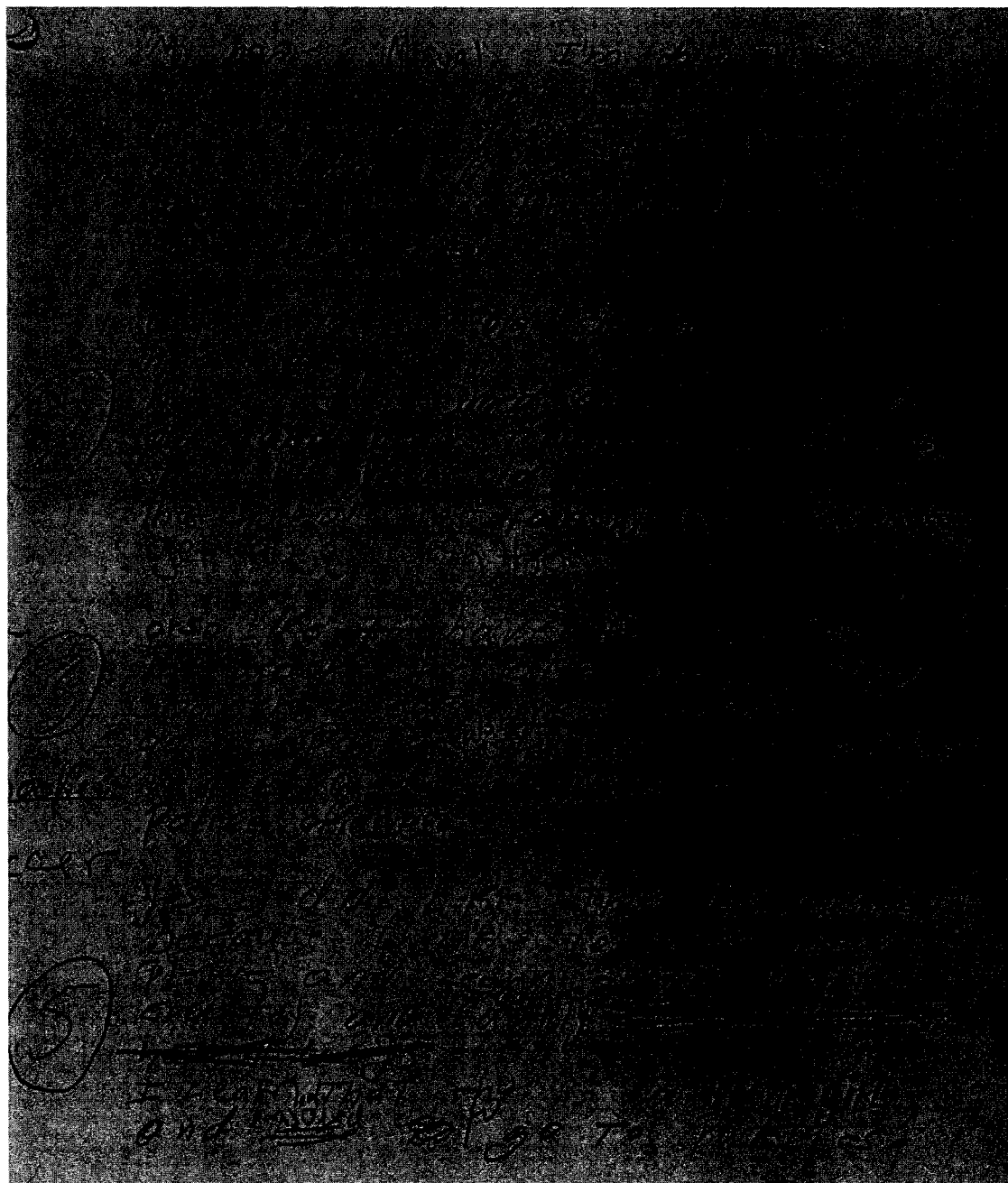
The pseudo-forms "filter out" or neutralize the potential benefits of the writing and reading that these students do engage in, giving students less experience with writing and discourse than one might conclude from a cursory inspection of the curriculum. This discourse deprivation, not surprisingly, yields poor achievement. (105)

For Miguel the lack of discourse on writing left him somewhat stranded when it came to his writing. He was unsure how to connect the decontextualized lessons he learned about sentences and paragraphs in his ELL class to the decontextualized "process" steps he learned in his English class.

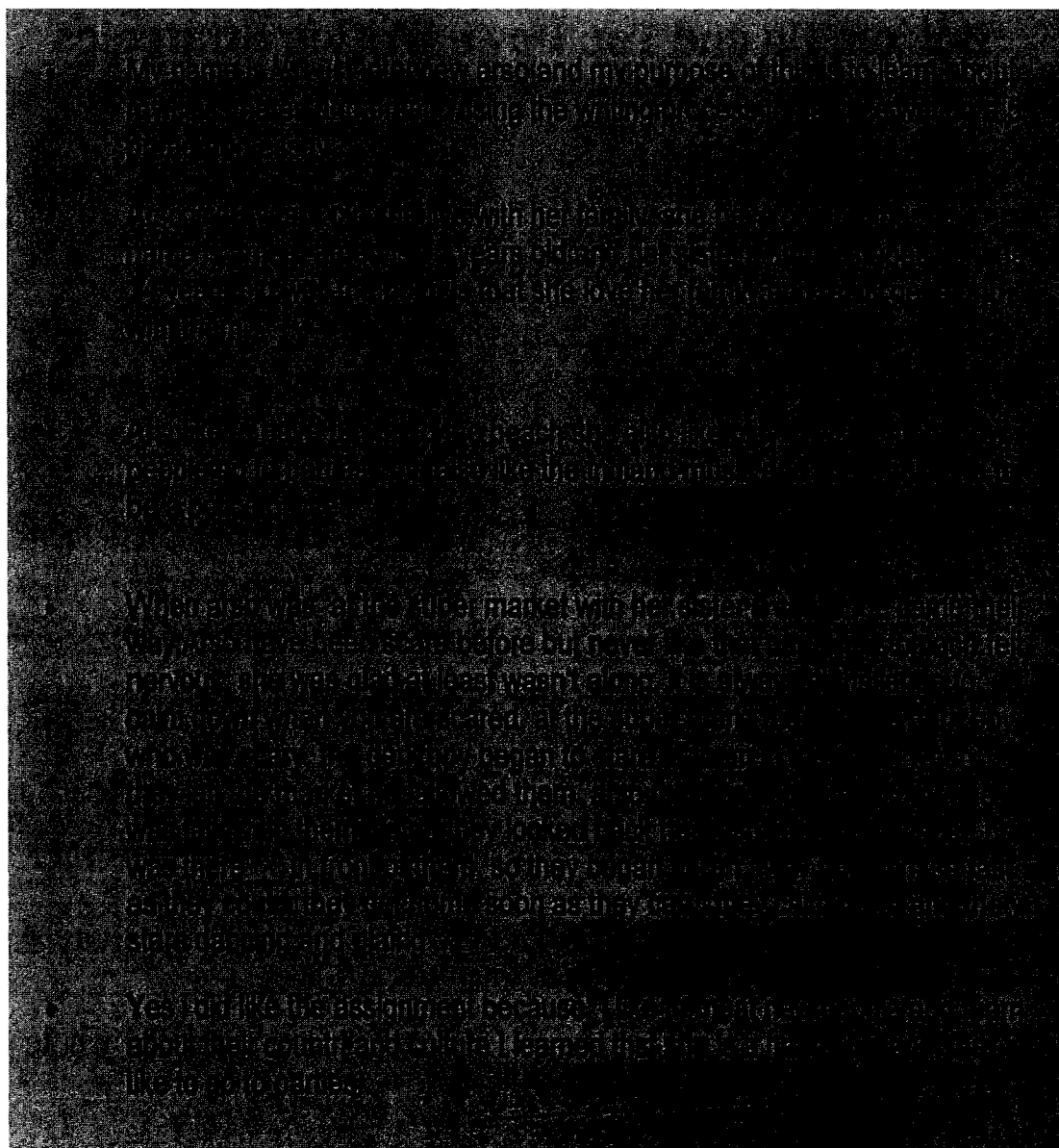
---

not pay close attention to writing skills." It is an interesting distinction that suggests that general English classes, like those offered in the first-year are not seen as "writing classes" per se. But since "the writing classes," like Practical Writing and College Composition are primarily offered in junior or senior year at Mill River, students do not have the option of taking any additional writing instruction courses during their first-year, sophomore, and sometimes junior year. The idea of "writing courses" and "non-writing courses" also points to the sense of division and conflict that high school English teachers often feel about their subject matter.

Figure 6.4 Miguel's first draft of the interview essay.



**Figure 6.5 Miguel's final draft of the interview essay.**



It all seemed to be about following the rules and Miguel learned very little about how to be a writer. He copied the definitions off the board, but had no idea what they really meant or how they might play a beneficial role in his writing. Each list and definition was a hollow term.

Miguel went about writing in English as he always had, putting words on paper without considering his purpose or his audience, or what they might expect to see from his writing. Miguel thought more about spelling and punctuation than about sentiment. He did not see writing as engaging or as a critical thinking activity. It was about repetition and procedure. In this case, the writing process had been distilled to the point where memorizing the steps was more important than writing. So much so, that for the final exam for this English class, students were not required to write an essay or narrative *using* the steps, but instead they were instructed to *write out* and *define* the four steps, in fulfillment of the “essay” portion of the exam.<sup>29</sup>

My concern about the presentation on writing process here is not a new one. Lad Tobin (1994) tells us the story of Donald Graves’ “shock and dismay” when he first overheard two teachers discussing the differences between what they described as the “the three-step and the four-step Graves Writing Process.” I think Tobin and Graves would agree that a “lockstep” four-step writing process was never the intention of the writing process movement. But as standards and testing mandates have increasingly commoditized educational benchmarks and concepts, and publishers have looked for ways to profit on those trends, the concept of a writing process has been codified and simplified to the point where it is often more a matter of procedure and form than a critical thinking activity.

---

<sup>29</sup> The kinds of instruction that students received in their mainstream English classes were not directly linked to their identities as English language learners. Instead, the link was more circuitous, caught up in their placement in lower-level academic tracks because of their level of English language. The intentions were to place these second language students in courses where the curriculum took a slower pace and the reading/writing assignments were less demanding. They received the same instruction as their mainstream, low-academic track, native English speaking peers. For example, Miguel’s experiences with the “four-step writing process” are his, but there may be many native English speakers, particularly those in lower-level academic tracks, who struggled with similar experiences of disconnection with the instructional writing practices they experienced.



Strikingly, at the end of the school year, all of my student participants, except Wisdom, reported that they had learned the concept of “writing process” during their first year of high school. Perhaps, more strikingly, at the end of the year all of them reported that it was something that they never used and never thought about when they had a writing assignment. Furthermore, they all spoke about revision only in terms of editing and “correcting” errors in response to teacher feedback.

### **Arhetorical Teacher Response and Assessment**

*Written teacher commentary will likely continue to as a crucial part of composition instruction, it is important that we carefully examine the nature and effectiveness of such responses.*

– Dana Ferris (143)

In her essay, “One Size Does Not Fit All: Response and Revision Issues for Immigrant Student Writers,” Dana Ferris has argued that “immigrant student writers take teacher feedback very seriously and value it highly” (151). Based on her previous research, Ferris contended that “immigrant student writers are capable of utilizing teacher feedback to improve their papers during revision” (151). Despite these claims, the teacher response and assessment that the students in my study received was overwhelming arhetorical or nonexistent.

After Miguel handed in the final draft of his essay, he received the paper back from his teacher with a tally of the score and a single word circled. There were no other comments: no suggestions for future essays, no input on sentence structures, and no remarks about the content.

The teacher's written scores reveal that the bulk of the grade came from Miguel's demonstration of the four-step writing process and for submitting the collection of pages that contributed to final product. At the top of the tally, the teacher had crossed out "105" twice and replaced with "95." When I asked Miguel about this, he thought that the teacher may have made some error with calculations and confided in me that he was convinced the grade was "supposed to be 105." But the teacher's cross-outs and re-tabulation made me wonder if there wasn't more here. I wondered if these cross-outs revealed something about the teacher's anxiety and concern about how to grade his work. Strikingly, there were no other comments on his work that might contextualize the grade.

When Miguel received his 95, the teacher's notes on the his paper reveal that a bulk of the score was for demonstrating the process. But when Miguel met with me, I asked him about the English essay assignment. He reported: "It's good. That essay...The essay that I got a 105 on." He then proudly showed me the paper. When I asked Miguel how he felt about that grade, he told me that he was "happy." Indeed, he was proud of his success. As I gently prodded further and asked if there is anything he might want to change or improve upon if he were to write the essay again. He pointed to the one circled word on the page: "Sowser" and explained to me that it was his only mistake in the whole essay, the only thing that the teacher circled. He added that when he showed his mother his grade; his mother proudly placed the essay on the refrigerator and showed it to the extended family.

When Miguel transferred to Mill River South, he was surprised to receive poor grades on his writing for tests in his English and other classes. His English teacher at Mill River South did not have much experience working with second language writers and

noted that although Miguel certainly needed more help in writing, the writing “portion” of the curriculum had already been covered by the time he transferred to the new school. Miguel struggled to receive passing grades, often taking tests and writing assignments in the ELL classroom where he was helped by the ELL teacher, who corrected the pages with red marks and then sent him off to rewrite (or edit) them. As the year went on, he became more reluctant to share his papers and test scores with me, and he became disappointed in himself as a student.<sup>30</sup> But there was also a sense that he just couldn’t figure out what had happened between the A on that essay and his subsequent grades at Mill River South.

Overall, Miguel’s experience with his teacher response illustrated how many of student participants’ teachers, both in ELL and English, were uncertain about how to respond to his written work in ways that might aid him as a writer. In my survey of the teachers, the concern over how ELL students were graded on their writing emerged as a contentious theme that showed an array of anxiety, anger and division among teachers from within and across both disciplines. Indeed, most of the English teachers that responded to the survey, voiced a genuine sense of concern and confusion when it came to working with their second language writers. The teachers acknowledged that the written product did not always reflect the cognitive abilities of the students, but they weren’t sure how to even begin to respond to the students’ writing or how to teach them. As two teachers noted in their responses:

“Grading and assessment are tricky because their language barrier does not reflect their effort. They need an ESL study so that can have their English concerns addressed.”

---

<sup>30</sup> At the end of his first year in high school, Miguel’s English proficiency test in writing had dropped two points from the previous year. Although inter-rater variability may certainly play a role in his scoring and lower score, it is concerning that the test did not indicate improvement in his writing.

I am also concerned about how to grade them. How do you distinguish between an “A” and an “A” for a particular student. I think language barriers present problems with expression for the kids as well.

Clearly these English teachers were concerned about their second language students. They acknowledged the difficulty of language, expressed empathy for the student’s struggles to learn English, and respected the efforts of these students. But the question of “how do you distinguish between an “A” and “an ‘A’ for a particular student?” is the one that speaks to the level of contest and division that exists when it comes teaching writing to these students.

In contrast to these well-meaning English teachers, there were the well-meaning realists: the ELL teachers, who wielded their red pens vigorously. In my survey and observations, ELL teachers noted that they regularly had students question their placement in ELL classes by pointing to high grades in mainstream English classes. As one ELL teacher explained in my survey, “My biggest concern is that mainstream teachers get stuck grading them for their ideas, more than writing ability, so a C paper gets an A or B, and the students think his work is better than it is.” Another ELL teacher built on that concern, noting,

The students tell us that ELL class (upper-level) is harder than their mainstream English class. It appears that Language Arts is left behind in middle school. Sometimes ELL students pass mainstream classes even though they pass in poor work. This makes them think that ELL teachers are too picky.

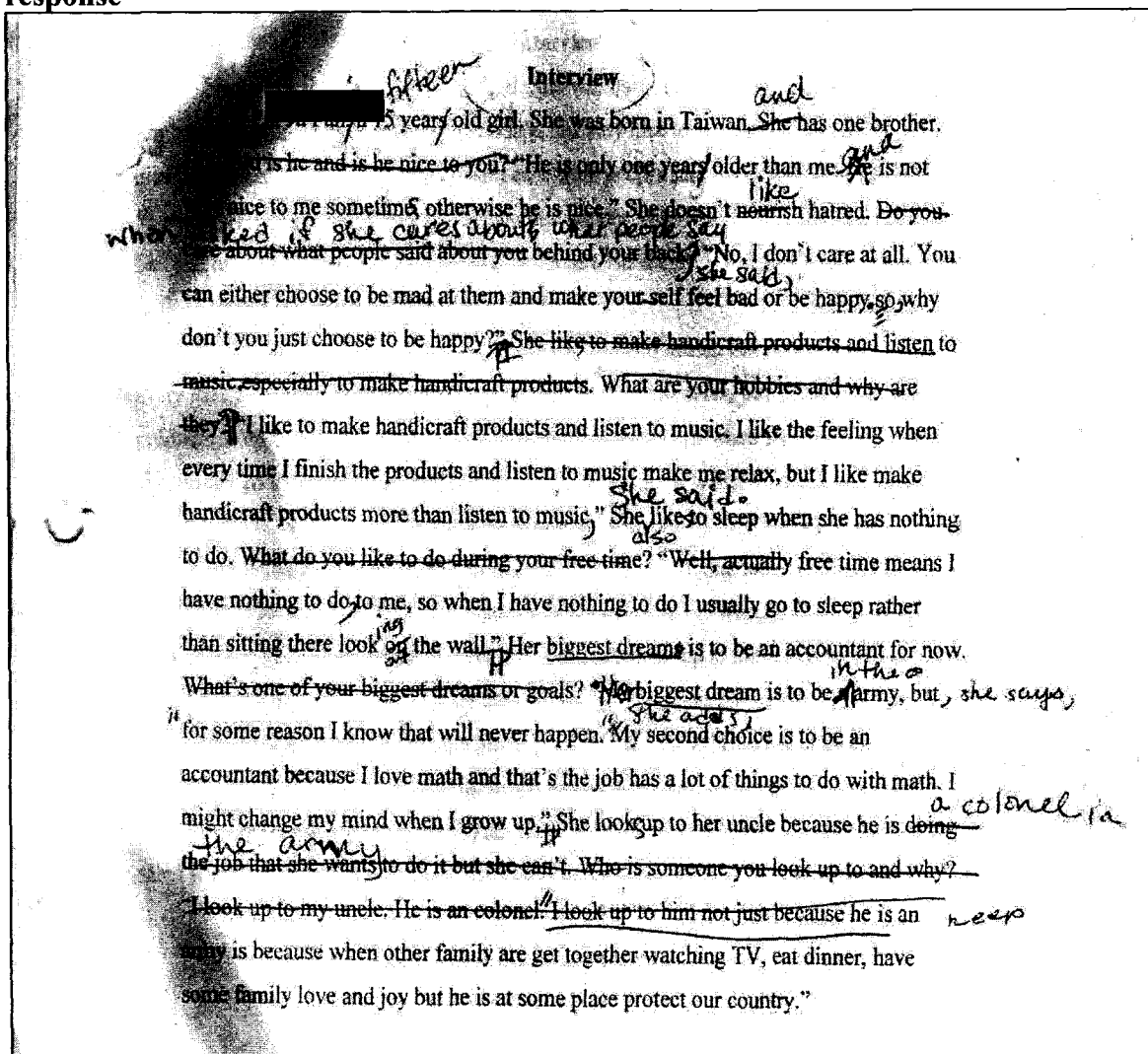
For their part, some of the English teachers, revealed a similar degree of concern, but with an even sharper edge. As one teacher wrote, “My biggest concern is actually with the way teachers confront the problems of multilingual students. There should not be ‘mercy grades’ given to those who “try hard.” If they can’t write, they don’t deserve an

‘A.’” This statement with its emphasis on “the problems of multilingual students” reflects the same sentiment of ELL students as deficient and problematic that I discussed in Chapter 5. And although I would agree with the teachers’ concern over “mercy grades,” the larger problem seemed to be about the low level expectations when it came to these students and teachers who were unsure about how to provide effective and useful response to the writing of second language students. Overwhelmingly, my research revealed that mainstream English teachers were both concerned about second language student writing but also ill-equipped to know how to respond.

The responses that students did receive from their teachers tended to be rhetorical, completely absent of writer and reader. The responses rarely acknowledged the writer’s stance or rhetorical objectives. Like the survival genres and the lockstep writing process, the teachers’ responses did not acknowledge that there was a writer behind the writing assignment or that the writer might use the revision process to set goals and critically think about their purpose, content, and readers. The teachers’ responses rarely asked students to stretch themselves as writers and thinkers, and there were almost no instances where teachers pointed out places where students were meeting writing objectives or excelling as writers. Instead, the comments were strictly editorial in nature. The teachers overwhelmingly limited their responses to cross-outs, providing replacement words or sentences, and notes on verb endings. As students moved from rough draft to final draft, the revision process became exclusively about editing or correcting the papers based on the teacher’s marks. Furthermore, most of the teachers provided little sense of how these second language students’ should read these marks and changes. At the beginning of the year, some students received a copy of a teacher’s code

with the standard explanation for editorial marks: like ¶ for starting a new paragraph. But in the course of the year, the students were regularly handed back first drafts with response like the one in Figure 6.6 from Ken's English class.

**Figure 6.6 Ken's first draft of his interview essay with his English teacher's response**



In this sample, Ken's teacher has crossed out entire sentences and section, added new phrases, made notations for new paragraphs, and added conjunctions and verb endings.

In the essay above, Ken had incorporated elements of the actual interview into his writing—a method he frequently used in other pieces of writing in order, in his words, to

“add the person’s voice” into the piece. It was a rhetorical strategy on his part, but in the classroom, there was little time or opportunity for Ken to articulate that goal. The response he receives from his teacher—all those cross-outs and replacement phrasings—are all offered with no explanation of why these changes are necessary or needed by the reader. There is no explanation of what works here and what doesn’t. The feedback that Ken received here was strictly editorial, not necessarily educational. The teacher did try to spend a moment or two with each student as she passes back the commented drafts, but with 28 students in the room and only 46 minutes of classtime, these “conferences” were short and did not lead to any real engaged conversation on writing and/or the writer’s goals.<sup>31</sup> In Ken’s revision of this essay, he simply made the changes and passed in the “revised” version. The feedback and response seen in this example were in line with many of the teachers’ responses that the other student participants received in their other English classrooms.

The teacher surveys supported the students’ experiences. Overwhelmingly, when asked about their concerns/questions in regard to multilingual students, English teachers replied that grammar and mechanics were the biggest concerns. As one teacher noted, “Many multilingual students are easily frustrated by the number of “exceptions” in English grammar, they often give up trying to learn the rules.” Another noted the following concerns: “Not understanding tense, odd spellings of word, slang we use, words that have a variety of meaning.” None of the teachers addressed any concerns or

---

<sup>31</sup> In her recent essay, “The Truth about High School,” high school teacher Milka Mustenikova Mosley comments extensively on the differences between teaching high school and college composition. She notes that, “Oftentimes, teachers avoid assigning much writing because they have very little time to grade it. Depending on the number of students, the load can often reach around 150 papers per writing assignment.” (63).

questions regarding invention strategies, content, rhetorical issues of purpose, genre, or audience. One teacher commented that “I can only respond by noting that these students often have problems with verb endings, articles, and prepositions.” While another teacher, noting a sense of camaraderie with multilingual students, commented, “I am a multilingual student who grew up learning 2 languages side by side. We did grammar all the time. I managed to live through it. [...] ESOL kids have problems with preposition use and some verb tenses and use of articles. [...] Let me know if your research recommends going back to diagramming sentences. I can still do it in 2 languages!” Given these sentiments about the teaching of writing to multilingual students, the comments and marks that Ken received on his essay are not surprising.

For their part, the students in my study did not often know what to do with the teachers’ responses when they received it. They weren’t always sure what the marks meant or why certain changes were necessary. As Dana Ferris noted in her studies of immigrant writers and teacher response, “the students reported experiencing a least occasional confusion over teacher’s questions in the margins or endnotes and over grammatical symbols, corrections.”(147). For the students in my study, these moments of “confusion” often came when teachers’ corrections and cross-outs did not include any explanation or additional comments. The students knew that they had made an error, and they appreciated that the teacher had written in “the correct way” for phrasing or grammar, but they were never quite sure what rule they had violated or why a certain phrasing might be a better choice. Since they accepted the teacher’s red marks as the authority on English and writing, they simply recopied the draft using the teacher’s “rewording” and corrections, as the “revising” step, and passed it in for the grade. In



fact, when I asked the students about how they used teacher response to improve their writing, their responses reflected both the emphasis on error correction as revision and reproducing the teacher's language. I asked: When you received comments from your teacher on your writing, how did you use that feedback? In response, Miguel told me: "I change the spelling." Paul noted that, "I went back to the writing and make some changes so that it looked and sounded better." And Ken, in the most obvious example, commented, "I just correct it."

The problem with this directive and editorial approach of teacher response is that it assumes two things: (1) that the only response that the students are capable engaging is arhetorical and the transcription of other people's words, and (2) that it is the only response that they need to improve their writing and themselves as writers. For second language writers, the kind of feedback reaffirmed their representation as being individuals incapable of engaging in reflective, critical discourse and discussion on writing and other intellectual activities. The cross-outs and the lack of written commentary made it difficult for second language writers like Miguel and Ken to become more self-sufficient readers of their own work, because they were reliant on the teacher to show them what was wrong and they rarely learned from the corrections, nor did they discuss strategies and techniques that might increase their independence and confidence as writers. In many ways, these kinds of responses reinscribed the students' identities as dependent and vulnerable when it came to academic writing. In my study, teachers often used academic writing, in the forms of essay exams and five-paragraph themes, as one of the main tools of assessment for gauging students' understanding of classroom material and critical thinking skills. When students failed to show improvement or critical

thinking skills in their writing, teachers often saw the second language students in my study as incapable of doing more, including moving up the academic track.

### **Exceptions and Attempts to Vary Genres and Approaches**

Only one student, Therese, experienced a broader range of genres and writing instruction. In her Level 1 English class, Therese's teacher regularly assigned personal narrative, argument and persuasive writing, and creative writing. During my observations, I observed numerous discussion on the readings and novels that the class read, and the teacher regularly talked about the author's purpose and rhetorical awareness of audience. She encouraged students to consider those same concerns when she assigned a new writing assignment. She asked them to consider their use of language, their purpose, and their audience as they completed a wide variety of writing assignments. In addition, the teacher provided regular models of genres for each assignment and encouraged students to mimic the form if necessary to build their confidence and expertise with a new genre or writing technique.<sup>32</sup>

The class in many ways was remarkable, because many of the students were on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), indicating special education concerns and others were English language learners. And although the class was a Level 1, bottom-tier academic track, the teacher worked enthusiastically to engage them in critical thinking and writing skills. In Therese's English class, writing was viewed as a intellectual activity that all students could participate even if their written product was not perfect or "error-free." Therese's teacher approach to the teaching writing reflected a blend of rhetorical analysis and a recursive writing process. There was a strong emphasis on revision that went beyond simply correcting errors, although the teacher did explain and mark places where students like Therese were still

---

<sup>32</sup> I will address the importance of modeling in the next chapter.

struggling with language. Strikingly, when I asked Therese's teacher about her background and preparation as an English teacher, she noted that she often thought of herself as a writing teacher first, a literature teacher second. In her teacher preparation program, she had completed courses in composition theory, composition pedagogy, and literacy studies. She had been a student of Bonnie Sunstein, and those experiences had influenced the way she approached the curriculum and emphasized writing in her classes whether the classes were Advanced Placement or Level 1.

In addition to Therese's teacher, there were other teachers that made attempts to teach beyond the five-paragraph essay and provided a wider range of writing experiences for students. For example, Wisdom's teacher introduced a poetry unit, in which students studied and wrote their own poetry, during the final four weeks of the year—a move that completely revitalized Wisdom's interest in writing and English class. On another occasion, Ken and Paul's teacher initiated writer's journals in the middle of October and had students write for 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each class. As Paul explained it, "Everyday she gives us a topic to write about. Like how we feel about the Yankees loss or stuff like that.[...] They are okay. I like them. She only wants us to write a page." As Paul explained, it was an opportunity to write about "whatever came to your mind." The journal entries were graded on a scale of 1 to 5, with five being the best, and the teacher collected them once a week to grade, correct and make comments. In looking through Paul's and Ken's journals, there are entries on being a star in a movie, silly superstitions, Thanksgiving customs, bad habits, sibling rivalry, inanimate objects that might come to life, etc. Some prompts are more introspective; others are story starters, encouraging creativity and playfulness.

For Ken and Paul, the journals proved to be a valuable place to write. Many of their entries are short, ranging from 6 sentences to a 2 paragraphs. In fact, both students rarely reached the full-page requirement set forth by their teacher. But the entries do show that Paul and Ken were very willing to interact with the prompts, share and discuss their thoughts on the given issues, and exhibit a playfulness and creativity, as they engaged in writing about their lives and their futures.

But the journal assignments were short-lived as the teacher felt incredible pressure to move through the dominant material of readings, vocabulary, and literary terms that showed up prominently in the students' notebooks. In addition, as the teacher explained to me, the pressure of responding to 120 student journals every weekend, or even every other week, overwhelmed the teacher to the point where she just couldn't keep up. As a new teacher, she found her first year of teaching challenging, in terms of classroom management, course preparations, and student paperwork. And her responses to Paul and Ken's journals revealed that sense of being overwhelmed—with responses to early entries that commented on ideas and mark spelling and verb tense errors and later responses that simply provided a score or no response at all. By mid-December, she abandoned the journals, and the students never received them back after the winter break. From January to May, the writing assignments in the class became focused primarily on the five-paragraph essay and editing.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the genres and instructional practices that I have discussed in this chapter are recognizable to us as current-traditional pedagogies. As Gary Glau has explained in *Theorizing Composition*, “The current-traditional approach [...] insists on coherence, both in each paragraph and in the essay as a whole; each “theme,” therefore, can have only one

central idea—and that main topic is determined before the writing begins and often formulized in an outline the author follows while writing”(74). Sharon Crowley in her historical descriptions of current-traditional pedagogies, echoes many of the instructional practices that I have described here, writing that:

Current-traditional textbooks identified revision with the correction of mistakes—the stage that professional writers refer to as editing. Writers, revised not to reenvision what they had written, but to pretty up their work so that it met current traditional standards of correctness. [...] [...] teachers did not conceive of writing as a process of tentative starts and stops, wrong turns, successive drafts and extensive revision over time. (*The Methodical Memory*, 148)

I mention this connection to current-traditional pedagogies here in order to draw upon some of the criticisms that Crowley and other compositionists have made about these approaches to the teaching of writing and the implications for student learning. Crowley has noted in “The Current-Traditional Theory of Style: An Informal History,” these kinds of approaches to the teaching of writing “[limit] students to a concept of language whose only function is to translate ideas (whatever those are) onto a page. [...] it hinders students from using language as an exploratory or rhetorical medium” (250). As Crowley has argued in other publications, the most serious problem with this kind of writing pedagogy, this kind of “anti-writing,” is that it “establishes no voice, selects no audience, takes no stand, makes no commitment” (*The Methodical Memory*, 149). Like current-traditional pedagogies, the practices that I have articulated in this chapter “[standardize] and [forecast] how the writing process should develop” in doing so these instructional practices “[elide] differences among rhetorical situations, [deny] the location of any rhetorical act in a given community, and [transfer] discursive authority away from individual rhetors ( Crowley, *The Methodical Memory*, 167). It is in this last point, this

“transfer [of] discursive authority away from individual rhetors,” that I most concerned with as I think about the place and identities of second language writers in our schools (Crowley 167). These kinds of instructional practices take away the students’ agency and chip away at their voices, their growing sense of the English language and their belief in their intellectual capabilities.

What concerns me here is my underlying suspicion that the intermixing of an arhetorical writing process and the concentration on survival genres is that these instructional practices seem to underscore an impression that second language students are cognitively unable to engage in writing as a rhetorical and intellectual activity. In some ways, it is paradoxical. Numerous teachers during my observations noted that these students were bright in their own language, but it was as if all that “brightness” disappeared when it came to their English writing. Teachers and guidance counselors who, on one hand, had learned and been taught not to judge English language learners’ intelligence on their English proficiency levels, still did so on a regular basis. In some ways, the teachers’ efforts to try to make the material accessible (and simple) to the students also assumed that these second language students were unable to understand writing as a communicative process. These efforts failed to recognize the communicative skills and experiences that many of these students had had with language in the past, completing overlooking their competence in a native language and the competencies that they were continuing to develop in their second language.

There is an assumption about the intellect and the identity of English language learners that underlies the writing instruction that I have shown here, and that assumption is based upon the written output of these students. It suggests that their written output in

English is an appropriate and accurate indicator of their full cognitive, intellectual and academic abilities. But I contend that in many ways, by basing our assumption strictly on the English written output of these students, we are in danger of masking the depth of the intellectual capabilities of these students. When the writing curriculum in the classroom oversimplifies the kinds of genres and rhetorical situations that are available to students and codifies the writing process to a lockstep procedure, it has the opposite effect of leaving the power of writing out of these students' hands. Such a stance, even when propelled by testing mandates, perpetuates the notion that these students are outsiders to the communicative process. They are only allowed to observe and participate in the genres they need to pass the test, but gain no real insights or understandings into the power of the communicative practices that they need to surpass the academic restraints of tracking, and more importantly, to participate in the world beyond their school.

In the next chapter, my lens into the students' writing experiences moves more inward in an effort to provide to explore the kinds of competencies that second language writers bring with them and the kinds of identity shifts that they engage in, as they develop their academic literacy skills in and outside of school.

## CHAPTER VII

### CHALLENGES, COMPETENCIES, AND IDENTITY ON THE WRITTEN PAGE: STUDENTS (RE)WRITING TOWARD POSITIVE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

In the last two chapters, I examined the construction of students' identities in terms of institutional and instructional practices; in contrast, this chapter looks at what the student writers themselves bring to their desks and onto the written page. In *Writing and Identity*, Ivanic has argued that, "Writer identity is, surely, a central concern for any theory of writing in two senses: what writers bring to the act of writing, and how they construct their identities through the act of writing" (94). In this chapter, I draw upon Ivanic's argument to show what student writers in my study bring to "their act of writing"—insecurities and challenges; aggravations and frustrations; competencies and inspirations; and intelligence and perseverance. I ask: Where do they struggle? Where do they feel successful? And what competencies do they draw upon and demonstrate in "their act of writing"? In providing a closer look at the students' acts as writers, I argue that student writers are not wholly constrained by their social identities in school and often they find places in their writing practices to exert their multidimensional literacies and their rhetorical competencies.

In the first part of the chapter, I acknowledge the kinds of struggles and challenges that the students encounter as they write in their second language. I point out that these challenges and struggles, these "stumbling blocks," are often the most visible



aspect of their writing processes. In the second part of the chapter, I contend that second language writers often have competencies and resources that are sometimes overlooked (and often underutilized) in the classroom. In doing so, I extend the work of A. Suresh Canagarajah and his vision of “difference-as-resource.” I build upon Canagarajah’s concept of competencies and make connections between those competencies and student writers’ social identities. I argue that the students’ acts of competencies are often linked to what I term their *places of validation* and the students’ own efforts to construct (and reconstruct) positive social identities in their writing. I explore how these places of validation and the students’ written self-representations speak about their identities as second language writers and “English language learners.” In the end, I suggest that these innovations, strategies, places of validation, and representations form powerful “building blocks” in the students’ pursuit of academic literacy.

### **Stumbling Blocks: Challenges and Struggles of Writing in a Second Language**

“Puzzle” by Myrna Nieves<sup>33</sup>

I do not know/why I am writing in english  
a second language/a wave where  
spaces open into a void/and you just need  
to jump off a cliff

A language where approximate sounds  
suggest what I would like to say  
A language with blanks  
— like in a test—  
which my memory will remember  
sometime in the future.

---

<sup>33</sup> Nieves, Myrna. “Puzzle.” In Ed. Karen Ogulnick. *Language Crossings: Negotiating the Self in a Multicultural World*. NY: Teachers College Press, 2000.

In her poem, Myrna Nieves captures the challenges of writing in a second language, “where spaces open into a void,” and where English is “a language where approximate sounds suggest what I would like to say.” When teachers and administrators simplify writing curriculum for second language students to set of lockstep procedures and grammar rules, it is often in response to what they see in the classroom—watching students struggle to find the right vocabulary, choosing the correct verb tenses, and finding the right language to express their ideas. Often the teachers base their assessment of students’ abilities and English proficiency upon a single five-paragraph essay that gets passed into the homework bin, along with the papers from a hundred other students. But their concerns are well-intentioned, and I want to acknowledge that there are real challenges and difficulties to learning to write in a second language.

In this section of the chapter, I want to illustrate some of these struggles that second language writers face as they compose. Some of these struggles are influenced by the students’ own sense of English ownership and the complexity of their identities as second language writers. I present what I term “stumbling block” experiences to acknowledge what teachers often witness on the surface when they work with adolescent second language writers in the schools. But these stumbling block” experiences also serve the backdrop to the latter part of this chapter, where I explore these students’ competencies, innovation, and resiliency as writers; these are often the pieces of academic literacy development that occur off-stage and are not witnessed by their teachers.

When the student writers in my study faced an academic writing task, there were often moments where they struggled. On the pages, these moments were marked by

words crossed out and ideas that were often incomplete or simply trailed off. In these textual moments and in our interviews, the students themselves revealed nagging doubts about their competencies in English and as writers. The act of writing in a second language for academic purposes often re-confirmed (in their eyes) their deficiencies as English language learners, and the students' self-doubt often reinscribed the negative social identity of "ELL" that they tried to distance themselves from in other parts of their academic experiences. To illustrate these moments more fully, I share the following "stumbling block" experiences of Ken and Therese.

### **Ken**

Ken engaged in his struggle with English words fully armed. His pocket translator was always at hand. He reported that a dictionary sat by his desk at home, pages marked and words circled. All ready to be drawn into the battle with writing. A poster in Ken's upper-level ELL classroom reminded students to "check through to see if you can use any other words – higher level vocabulary."

It was in this goal of achieving "that higher level of vocabulary," that Ken, like many second language writers, struggled. His meticulous print masked his uncertainty, but his papers showed the wear of erasers rubbing out imperfections in word choices and sentence structures. During the research project, I regularly received copies of Ken's drafts in progress via email. The drafts were normally accompanied by his apologetic emails, marked by hesitancy, uncertainty, and embarrassment, like this one:

Hi,  
 I finished my paragraph, but it's like...I am telling a story, and it's really funny, and it's really bad too, it's like...I don't know how to explain, so are you sure you want see my paragraph? Because it's really funny and stupid, looks like I am not writing a paragraph that I suppose to do, looks like I am writing about my life. Get ready to laugh. aHA HA HA HA HA

Ken told me that he only let his teachers read his drafts. He was afraid that his friends, particularly his native-English speaking ones, would laugh at his writing. He had a fear of being seen as laughable and “stupid.” Even if he was able to blend and socialize with his English-speaking peers in the cafeteria and in classroom conversations, he worried that his writing would “out” him and his place as an English language learner.

In my observations of Ken in his ELL classroom, I was always stuck by the prominence of large, white eraser and mechanical pencil that he placed at the top corner of his desk during the opening minutes of each ELL class. In one of my observations, the prominence of that eraser on his written work became obvious as he worked on an essay describing the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. As his teacher looped the classroom, she asked students about the introductory paragraph that they were supposed to have written the night before. When the teacher stopped at Ken’s desk and asked if he had completed the assignment, he replied, “yes, but I just erased it.” The ELL teacher asked, “Why?” and Ken explained, “Because it’s bad.” Taken aback, the teacher told the class that they would have the class period to work on their next two paragraphs. She then quietly told Ken that she wanted to see “some of his writing before he [left]” for the day to ensure that he was making progress.

In the hour that followed, I observed Ken as he wrote. I saw how regularly he paused. He wrote; he erased—sometimes whole sentences and whole paragraphs, sometimes just a word or two. Often he reworded the same line or phrase multiple times,

each time carefully erasing the previous attempt so that there was no evidence of his earlier attempts. On occasion, he pulled out his translator and looked up a word or two. At one point, he struggled for over fifteen minutes on a single sentence. His ELL teacher witnessing his frustration stopped by his desk and tried to help him move forward with the assignment by providing him with a model sentence, that she wrote at the top of the page, suggesting that he follow that as a model for the sentence that was troubling him.

At the end of class, I talked with Ken and look at what he had written. He told me that he found this writing assignment to be difficult. He couldn't express what he wanted to say. As he explained, frustrated, "In Chinese, it would be easier. I know the words." As we talked further, I learned from Ken that his frustration was not simply about vocabulary. If it was the vocabulary, Ken argued, the translator would help him. For Ken, the difficulty was in the emotion that he wanted to express in his writing. In particular for this piece on Edgar Allan Poe, he struggled because he wanted to make a certain impact on his readers through his words. I asked him, if it might help to write in Chinese first, to get some of his ideas down on paper. Ken shook his head; he was adamant, no. He explained to me, "It just doesn't translate. This is really hard. Really hard." In our discussions, Ken tried to articulate the problem as he saw it. As a writer he felt that, the conclusion of the essay ended too abruptly for his tastes. As he said over and over, "it ends too quickly... it ends with nothing."

As I thought about that conversation, it dawned on me that the "lack of words" that troubled Ken not only stymied his ability to express his sentiments, but it also stymied his ability to be rhetorically savvy. For Ken, a student with a good sense of his audience and purpose in this piece of writing, the greater sense of frustration came not

from a lack of vocabulary, but from an inability to rhetorically reach his audience. The teacher's suggestion, though grammatically correct, did not convey the impact that he wanted to bring to his writing. He told me that he wanted a "strong ending" and her suggestion did not help him to do that. On one level, he was stymied by the lack of English words in his repertoire, but for Ken, he was more concerned that he couldn't find the level of complexity, the kinds of sentence structures, that would articulate his meaning and achieve his desired effect. In his explanations and his articulations of the challenge that he was facing, I was struck by how much he was thinking as a writer. But in that moment, the teacher response remained in survival mode, and her response reflected the stress on "getting through an assignment" over the rhetorical aims of the student writer.

### **Therese**

When Therese began school in the United States, she told her eighth grade teacher that the English words hurt her mouth. Less than a year later, she sat in a mainstream English classroom, writing an essay on "who she is becoming" and it was the lack of English words that halt her voice *and* her pen. In an interview, Therese explained to me what makes her stop and hinders her voice when she writes for her classes: "I saw a mistake and I felt bad. So I stopped."

Research on second language writers tells us that she is not alone. Tony Silva and others have noted that composing in a second language is often "more constrained" and "more difficult." In addition, studies<sup>34</sup> have shown that the actual act of writing for

---

<sup>34</sup> Tony Silva's landmark essay (1993), "Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing: The ESL Research and Its Implications," summarized a number of studies conducted in second language writing and argued that writing teachers should have an understanding of "the unique nature of L2 writing"

second language writers is often slowed by frequent pauses and concern over generating material, making errors, and finding appropriate vocabulary. In Therese's experiences, these pauses and errors often stopped her writing outright, because they reinforced her concerns about being a capable student and effective communicator in the classroom.

In many ways, Therese's struggles with her "Who am I becoming" essay exemplified the kinds of struggles with language and writing that many of the students in my study encountered. To illustrate these struggles more fully, and to highlight how these kinds of challenges frustrated students and chipped away at their sense of themselves as critical thinkers and good students, I will share Therese's experiences with this assignment at length. The essay was assigned in late November for Therese's Level 1 English class. The prompt for the assignment read:

Who we are is an expression of our personality traits. Think of a personality trait that you would have, such as generosity, sensitivity to the needs of others, honesty, courage, diligence, discipline, responsibility, kindness, creativity. At the top of a new page write down the desired quality, then write a poem or paragraph about that quality.

Write out a plan on how to develop this quality in yourself. Be specific. What actions can you take each day?

Think of a skill that you would like to learn or develop such as driving a car, drawing, playing tennis, playing a musical instrument, singing, using a computer, or carpentry. Name the skill you want to learn and describe it. Picture yourself having mastered this skill. Then draw a picture of yourself using that skill. Describe what it's like to have reached your goal. Then write about what you will need to develop this skill: a coach, written or verbal instruction, materials or equipment, hands-on experience, practice. Make a plan. Be specific.

---

and "of how and to what extent it differs from L1 writing" (191). Based on his data, Silva aptly argued that "[these] differences need to be acknowledged and addressed by those who deal with L2 writers if these writers are to be treated fairly, taught effectively, and thus, given an equal chance to succeed in their writing-related personal and academic endeavors" (203).

When Therese showed me the prompt, I asked her to explain what it meant. She noted that it had to do with the future and figuring out who you want to be. She explained, “We have to answer the questions that are here. And then make it...put it all together.” As she explained the assignment back to me, she noted that she decided to write about creativity, the final word in the list of words from first part of the prompt. She told me that many of the ELL students in the class did not understand the prompt or the words, so her English teacher explained everything “so we can get it. And she gave examples with herself.”

Therese handed me a copy of her draft of the essay, which she had completed during her study hall and given to her teacher. In red pen, she has written out an annotated version of the prompt along with her brief responses (Figure 6.1). In the middle, she had drawn a stick figure with two thought balloons, one with a sunset and one with an ice cream cone. After the picture, she had copied more of the prompt down and written: “I think that I can so something created every day, like draw a picture in my mind and then put it on a paper.” It struck me that she was mimicking back some of the prompt’s own language, pointing to drawing and using the mind to create pictures. As I asked her about the writing sample, Therese talked about her difficulties with the assignment. She was frustrated. The draft that she handed into her teacher wasn’t her best work, and she knew it. I asked her about the prompt, and she said that she thought it was a good one—interesting and engaging. She liked having to think about these kinds of self-reflective questions. But it was hard. In our interview, Therese explained:

T: One of the problems I had was I didn’t know how to express myself very well... Because sometimes I want to say something but I didn’t find the words.

C: What did you want to say?

T: In that question, like drawing pictures. I don’t know how to draw the pictures so I draw an ice cream cone.



C: What does that represent?

T: I don't know. It like represent like my imagination. Like this huge ice cream cone with chocolate chips on it.

C: Okay. And then you have a sunset?

T: Uh-huh.

C; So are these things you want to be able to draw?

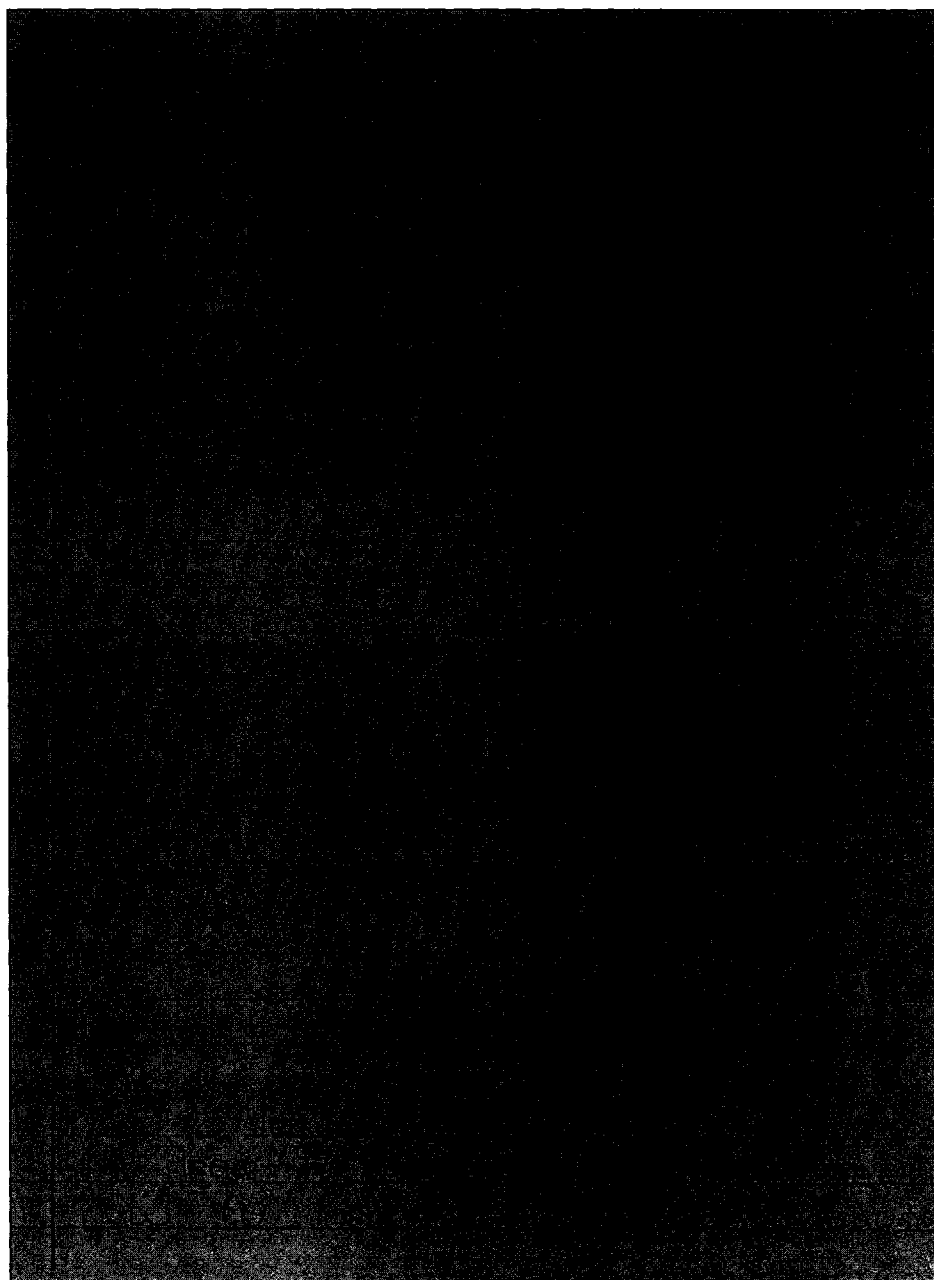
T: Uh-huh.

C: So do you think you want to be an artist? Is that what you are talking about here (in the writing)?

T: Hmmm. No not an artist. But like, can make, like some people do stuff so creative. And the only thing that I can draw is the sunset.

As she tried to find the words to discuss her ideas during our interview, she still struggled. She told me that her English teacher suggested that she draw out some of her ideas in order to get started, to locate some of the vocabulary she might need. Indeed, the prompt itself encouraged that kind of link, by suggesting respondents draw a picture of themselves, "using that skill." But Therese found the suggestion difficult, because she doesn't like to or know how to draw pictures. In some ways, the suggestion just made her feel more incompetent. With reluctance, Therese attempted to draw her thoughts, following the advice of her teacher. But the drawing reflected her lack of involvement: a simple stick figure with two thought balloons, one showing a sunset on the horizon and the other, an ice cream cone. They were the only kinds of pictures she knew how to draw and both were completely disconnected from her intentions as a writer. When I asked her about what she wanted to represent her, she told me, "I want to like write an essay and I want to have many words on it, like some words that are different."

**Figure 7.1** Therese' writing for the essay assignment on "Who I am Becoming"



When I asked her why she didn't try to write it in Spanish first, her answer was adamant: "This is my English class." Therese told me that her English teacher suggested the same idea, but that she rejected it. Although her English teacher encouraged her to

draw upon her Spanish language and knowledge, Therese saw and defined the course as being all about English and English acquisition. She told me that she was worried that if she tried to write in Spanish first, the Spanish and English languages would become “confused.” She contended that there was no connection between the two, and that drawing on her Spanish language would not help her to become better at English. For Therese, the lack of language, the inability to use “words that are different,” reaffirmed her sense that when it came to the English language, she just wasn’t smart.

Although Therese was confident of her abilities to write and articulate her ideas in Spanish, a point I explore at length in the latter part of this chapter, she was hesitant to draw upon her Spanish knowledge and abilities in her English writing. When I suggested an experiment of sorts, a chance to respond to the original prompt in her native Spanish, she was at once skeptical and curious. I asked her to humor my curiosity, and she picked up her pen and paper. As I made copies of her other work, I observed her write nonstop for fifteen minutes. There was fluidity and confidence as she attacked the paper with the pen. When I sat back at the table, she wrote a final sentence and handed the paper to me with flourish. As a point of comparison, Figure 6.3 shows an excerpt from the “experiment” with writing in Spanish, along with an English translation of the writing sample.

Figure 7.2 An excerpt from Therese's writing on creativity in Spanish<sup>35</sup>

Yo creo que la personalidad  
que a mí más me gustaría  
tener sería la creatividad.  
Yo creo que me gustaría ser  
creativo porque no se es  
como un don que no todo el  
mundo tiene y que te da la  
oportunidad de crear cosas  
en tu mente, también de darte  
la oportunidad de hacer  
y darle vida a ciertos objetos.  
Como cuando me levanto de la  
cama me gustaría tener la crea-  
tividad suficiente como para combinar  
diferentes colores en mi vestuario  
y no solo ponerme todo de un mismo  
color o tener la creatividad suficiente  
como para hacerme diferentes peinados  
y no solo el pelo suelto o una cola.  
Yo creo que para incrementar mi  
creatividad yo debería de leer  
más manuales y algo que me  
gustaría aprender hacer sería el  
usar la computadora porque la he notado  
abandonada tanto que todo lo que uno

<sup>35</sup> Here is an English translation of Therese's writing:

I believe that the personality that I would like to have is the creativity. I believe that I would like to be creative because it, itself, is like a gift that not everyone has and that you have the opportunity to create things in your mind. Also it gives you the opportunity to do things and to give life to certain objects. When I get out of the bed, I'd like to have the sufficient creativity to combine different colors in my wardrobe and not only dress in all of the same color or to have the sufficient creativity as to do different hairstyles and not have only loose hair or only a ponytail.

Noticeably, Therese's Spanish essay on "becoming more creative" used more words, those "different words" that she so wanted to be able to use in the English version of the essay. She used large words and sentiments, imagination and imagery. But even more apparent was the strong sense of Therese's voice here. Her discussion of creativity revealed her interest in fashion and design, something that she never articulated in her conversations with me or in her English version of the assignment, but that coincided with the various fashion magazines that I would find her sifting through whenever we met at the library and her evolving use of make-up and hair accessories during the year.

In showing this excerpt from her Spanish writing, I hope to highlight how much is hidden from our view as English writing teachers, when students are hindered by a sense of limited vocabulary and a lack of confidence in their sense of themselves as writers and owners of English. Despite the best efforts of her English teacher to encourage Therese's abilities and talents in the her English writing, Therese's experiences as an writer in her English classroom were very much impacted by her sense that she did not own English, that she was an outsider to writing in this setting. I cannot help but wonder if the place of English language learners in her school, along with her desire to blend with native-English speakers and not be stigmatized as an English language learner, compelled her to reject her Spanish literacy and to forge forward in English only—without dictionaries, without translations, and without the drawing upon the supports of her first language.

When Therese and Ken hand in their academic English writing assignments to their teachers, the struggles that I have depicted here are often the most visible markers of their "deficiencies" as "English language learners." These are the moments upon which administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors base many of their assumptions about

the academic abilities and talents of second language writers in high schools. These kinds of judgments seem especially accurate when class time for writing instruction is limited, when the discourse and discussion on writing are lacking, and when teachers only score the product. But these judgments often overlook a wide range of rhetorical skills, writing talents, and literacy competencies that second language writers develop and bring with them into their academic writing. In the section that follows, I look beyond the “visible markers” from the students’ text, beyond their deficient identities as “English language learners,” and beyond the classroom to show the wide range of competencies and resources that second language writers often have and how they use those resources to positively reshape their social identities in the academic setting..

**Building Blocks: Competencies, Places of Validation, and Moves Toward a Positive Academic and Social Identity**

*We have a long history in our profession where the linguistic/cultural differences of multilingual students has been treated as depriving them of many essential aptitudes required for successful academic literacy practices... Though it must be acknowledged that ESOL students would practice English academic writing in an L1 context and cannot escape from the norms of the dominant linguistic circles, we must still ask: How would our interpretation differ if we understood the composing strategies of ESOL students in terms of their own cultural frames and literacy practices?*

- A. Suresh Canagarajah (217)

In the introduction to his book *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*, A. Suresh Canagarajah raises poignant questions about the lens through which we view multilingual writers. The “deficiency” connotation of “English Language Learner” that I have discussed in Chapter 4 is not solely about a single school or school district, but part of more a pervasive sense of what Canagarajah has termed “difference-as-deficit”

perspectives on second language writers. In the secondary school setting, these “deficiency” perspectives have been further encouraged by the demands of high-stakes testing mandates and the increasing emphasis on teaching to the tests. Canagarajah suggests that research and pedagogy on second language writers should be shaped by a “difference-as-resource” perspective that gets into the nuance and complexity of multilingual writers and their competencies.<sup>36</sup> In suggesting a paradigm shift in our “reading” of second language writers, Canagarajah contends that,

it is important to take the students’ own expectations and orientations into account, situated in their own cultural and linguistic traditions to explain their writing practices. This way we are able to understand that there are good reasons why they do what they do.[...] Multilingual students do—and can—use their background as a stepping-stone to master academic discourses. (218)

The “stepping stones,” that Canagarajah mentions can be powerful indicators of how student writers use writing to resist and reinvent their social identities. I opened this chapter by pointing to Ivanic’s theory that writing and identity are intrinsically linked. Here, I want to bring the argument for second language writer’s competencies together with the idea that writing can be a powerful place for students to assert their identities and develop them. In particular, I want to argue that the moves and choices that the students in my study demonstrated when it came to their academic writing spoke volumes about the ways in which they constructed their identities as writers, and the ways in which they

---

<sup>36</sup> Canagarajah’s argument for “difference-as-resource” aligns with the work of literacy specialists like Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis’ whose work on “multiliteracies” moves to broaden our discussion on literacy development toward perspectives that takes into account our “culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies” along with “burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies.” In presenting a “pedagogy of multiliteracies, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis have noted that “cultural and linguistic diversity is a classroom resource just as powerfully as it is a social resource in the formation of new civic spaces” (15).

resisted or embraced their identities as “English Language Learners” and multilingual writers. Moreover, I argue that the students’ competencies and the locations in which those competencies, both inside and outside of school, were acknowledged often served as what I term *places of validation*. *Places of validation* are those physical or virtual locations inside and outside of the academic arena where students derive a sense of competency in themselves as students and receive affirmation for writing and rhetorical capabilities. These places of validation allowed students to move toward more positive social identities, bolstered their motivation to do well in school, and often re-established their own sense of themselves as academic achievers. Some students, like Therese and Ken, saw these places of validation as places to reaffirm and establish their identities as bicultural and biliterate academic achievers. Other students, like Paul and Wisdom, used their places of validation to align themselves more closely with U.S. youth and pop culture, thereby strengthening their identities as “owners” of English and U.S. culture.

Often the competencies and places of validation that students brought with them into their writing occurred outside of their English and ELL classrooms and outside of the school. But I want to be careful of building binaries here, particularly between in and out-of-school literacies, as I have seen these literacies blend and build on one another across the contexts in the experiences of these students. As I show here, the literacies and competencies that students build outside of school, outside of the English and ELL classrooms, often resonate and inform their rhetorical strategies and academic writing development overall. The key is to find those links and to help students articulate and develop the meta-language and awareness to actively and consciously develop and choose from their rhetorical repertoire, to consciously see the connections between their



various strategies and approaches to writing whatever the context, and to purposefully control and feel empowered by their language choices.

Although I have been approaching this dissertation thematically, I have decided to move through the last part of this chapter on a case-by-case basis. My rationale for this shift is that examining these students' competencies individually provides us with an understanding of insight into students' individual competences and the wide range of competencies that can exist among even a small group of students. In addition, focusing on each student allows for a fuller articulation of those these competencies link/influence shape these students' social identities beyond "being ELL." With each of the case, I examine the kinds of competencies that students demonstrated in their writing approaches and the places of validation that they found in other in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences. With some of the cases, I also present students' social influence maps<sup>37</sup> that they created to show the people, places, events, and things that had the greatest impact of their academic writing and their school achievement; these maps visually represent their "places of validation" and "stepping stones." I then explore how these competencies and places of validation helped students to reshape their academic and social identities beyond "being ELL."

### **Ken: Invoking Culture, Building a Bilingual Identity, and Blogging**

In my discussion of Ken's "stumbling block" moments, I suggested that part of his frustration with writing in English was grounded in his understanding of how certain texts should work and appeal to readers. Although Ken sometimes struggled to find the right words to express and impact his readers, his understanding of the impact of texts on

---

<sup>37</sup> I describe the social influence mapping activity in detail in Chapter 3.

readers spoke to the kinds of developing rhetorical competencies that Ken drew upon in his writing practices. In particular, I found that Ken had developed an understanding of genre awareness<sup>38</sup> and analysis that he drew upon when faced with a new writing assignment or challenge.

Ken's use of genre awareness was often a way to understand the expectations of his teacher and his American audience. In many ways, he would study and mimic writing styles and techniques that he found from books, the occasional teacher's model, and his peers. This was particularly true when it came to what he saw as more fun and risk-taking experiments with English writing. For example, when his English teacher introduced a writing assignment mimicking excerpts from Robert Fulghum's *All I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Ken discovered that he could use a diary format in his writing. He told me that he spent time and purposefully studied the excerpts that the teacher had given him, underlining and highlighting sections of the text, to think about the ways that he might mimicked Fulghum's style to achieve his own goals and meet the teacher's expectations. In Ken's final draft of the assignment, he mimicked the diary format, a technique that was not required for the assignment, but one that he thought was "cool." In addition, his voice evoked that same quality of playfulness and informality, using multiple exclamation points and capital letters to express his shock or enthusiasm as the

---

<sup>38</sup> Amy Devitt defines "genre awareness" as a skill in which students "analyze genres" and develop "a critical awareness of how genres operate so that they could learn the new genres they encounter with rhetorical and ideological understanding" (Devitt 194).<sup>38</sup> In her book, *Writing Genre*, Devitt proposes that the skill that most student writers need to develop is a sense of "genre awareness." Here, I borrow Devitt's definition of "genre awareness" to argue that this kind of rhetorical competency is one that second language writers often bring with them and develop in their own efforts to develop and advance their skills in academic English writing. Devitt suggests explicit teaching and classroom discussion to help students gain experience and confidence in developing this kind of awareness and analysis. These kinds of curricular shifts in the English and ELL classroom at the secondary level could hold positive benefits for both native-English writers and second language writers alike.

days unfolded. In thinking about Ken's competencies as a writer, I read his studious examination of Fulghum's text as a competency in genre awareness and analysis. It was a competency that he drew upon in other kinds of assignments, often turning to native-language texts to aid him with his English academic writing.

Ken borrowed rhetorical moves from literature that he read in their native language. For example, Ken was very frustrated by topic sentences. He understood his teacher's lesson on topic sentences and paragraphs. He had taken many notes on the function of the topic sentence and why it was valued by his teacher. But when it came time to write them, Ken found topic sentences frustrating. They were difficult for him to write. When I asked him to talk about that difficulty, the following exchange occurred:

K: You use some topic sentence. If you write the [topic] sentence that represents every idea up, then you have nothing left to write.

C: So a topic sentence should tell you everything?

K: Yeah.

C: And so then you have nothing left to say?

K: Yeah.

Ken's solution to this problem was to start using questions as his topic sentences. He determined that if he began the paragraph as a question, then he could "just answer the question" without having to give away all of his details and ideas in the opening sentence. When I asked Ken about the inspiration for this strategy, he told me,

I just started doing it earlier this year. I read some types of these books. And I just like copy the books' ideas. I discover some books that wrote like this, and then I like, I really like this [writing technique].

Ken went on to explain that whenever he had a writing assignment for English or ELL class, he often thought about the books he had read earlier and "[would] use the book idea" in his writing. He would study the style of the authors that he read, noting their

story-telling techniques, their use of time and characters, and even their stylistic strategies at the paragraph and sentence-level. As he illustrated in his map, he was avid reader of Chinese-language books, including Chinese translations of the Harry Potter series and other adventure novels. In our interview, when I asked Ken which books he had used to develop his strategies as a writer, he noted with pride: “Most of the books were Chinese. They are different from English.”

It wasn't the first time that Ken had drawn upon the rich literature of his native culture, and in other instances, he invoked his native culture, literature, and language to build a positive, rich social identity as a bilingual and biliterate writer. In one example of this practice, Ken wrote a ghost story for his ELL class. In the narrative, which took place in Ken's grandmother's house in Taiwan, Ken's family is haunted by a floating head and the ghostly of a girl. As the narrative comes to a close, it is revealed that the grandmother's home was once the site of a girl's murder and “‘her’ soul was left in that house” (Ken's narrative). In one of our interviews, Ken told me that his narrative was indeed “a real story.” He explained to me with great dramatic flair and in hushed tones, “it really happened.” But he also admitted that he was influenced by the ghost stories and other folktales that he often heard from family and friends when he lived in Taiwan.<sup>39</sup> His narrative was one of his favorites and one of his most accomplished writing samples from the year. In her written feedback to the piece, his ELL teacher commented, “This “reads” like a mystery story. I can't wait to find out what happens. Excellent description!! Is this

---

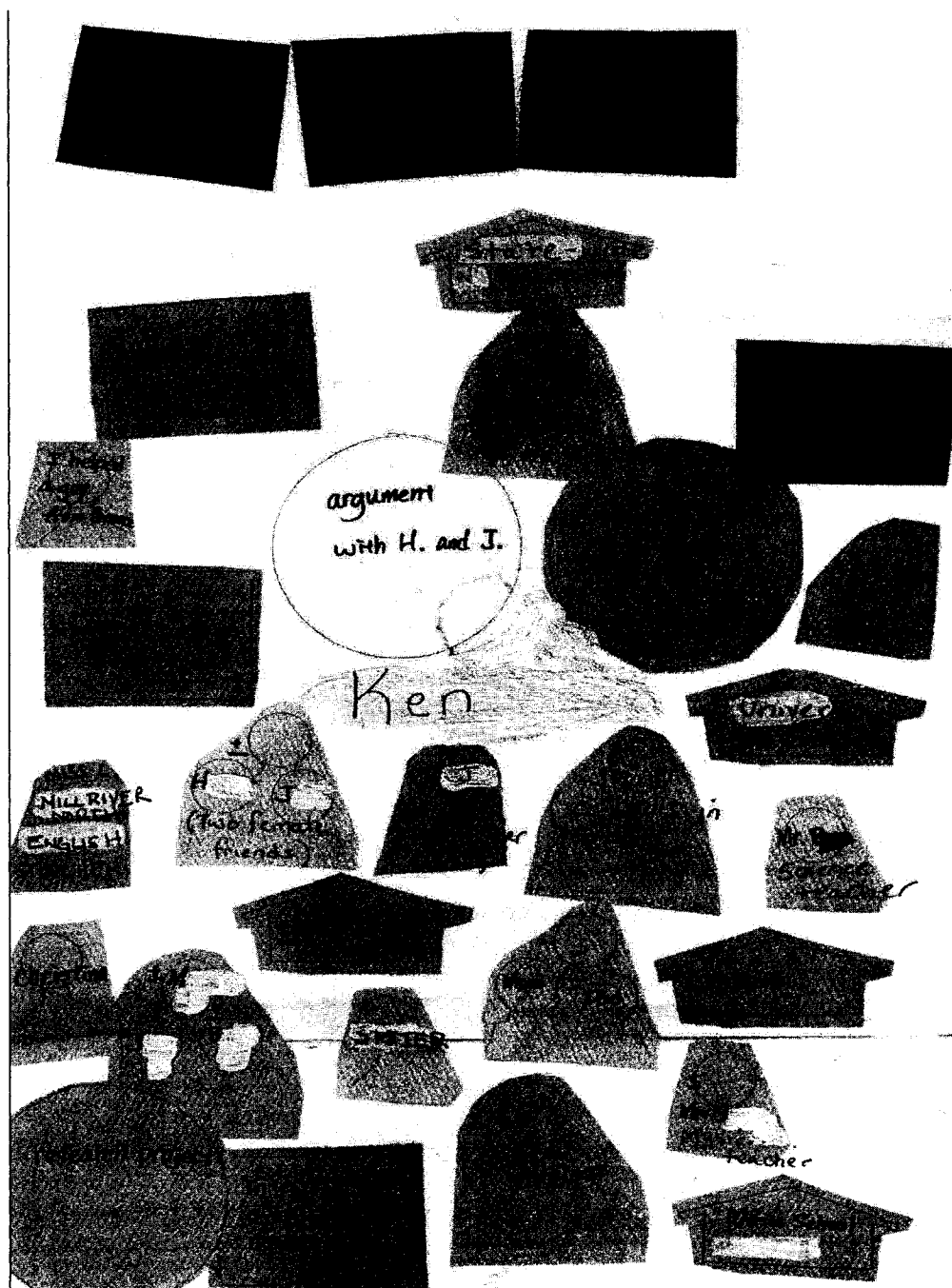
<sup>39</sup> The importance of Chinese ghost stories in Chinese culture and literature has been well documented by the work of Lucien Miller, professor of comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts, and other Asian literary specialists. Often these ghosts are young women who have met some tragic end and return as ghosts to avenge their deaths. Miller's book, *South of the Clouds: Tales from the Yunnan* (University of Washington Press, 1995) offers English translations of many of the kind of ghost stories and folk tales that form a kind of literary landscape by which to read narratives like the one written by Ken for his ELL class.

a true story? I believe it is. You are a really good storyteller.” In fact, during one of my observations, his teacher pulled me aside after class and raved about Ken’s story. She commented on how impressed she was by Ken’s narrative skills and by the evocative tale that he wove. Clearly Ken’s efforts to weave his cultural literacy experiences into his academic English writing received a positive response from his teacher and validated his abilities as a storyteller and writer.

Ken’s use of Chinese texts to guide his academic English writing was fascinating, because his strategy spoke to Ken’s personal ambition of staying true to his Chinese roots. When Ken completed his social influence map, shown in Figure 7.3, he used the map to illustrate his strong ties to his native country and language. He visually represented friends in Taiwan, Chinese texts, and a music teacher in Taiwan that he corresponded with over the Internet. Ken’s map also revealed and his competencies in computers and other forms of digital literacy.

Outside of school, Ken worked very diligently to craft a bicultural and bilingual identity for himself often turning to his prowess with technology to assist him. As an avid computer user, Ken discovered that the Internet opened up all sorts of venues for writing in both Chinese and English. Notably, his Yahoo email account was still based in Taiwan and he used both Chinese and English in much of his correspondence, even to English speakers like me. For example, quotations written in Chinese characters often served as a tagline at the bottom of his messages and his moniker as a sender was always in Chinese characters. Ken actively emailed with friends and music teachers back in Taiwan, asking questions and seeking advice when needed.

Figure 7.3 Ken's Social Influence Map



At the end of his freshman year, Ken took these kinds of exchanges to a new level by creating his own weblog. While blogging, he often wrote in Chinese, in an effort “to

keep up my Chinese.” He has also found a circle of on-line friends who were like him—adolescent Chinese immigrants attending high schools in the United States. They visited one another’s blogs frequently and write about their experiences in high school and at home. One of Ken’s blogging friends was a young woman from Texas who was also from Taiwan. She wrote in both languages and inspired Ken to strive to achieve that same level of artistry and proficiency in both Chinese and English for his blog. He told me that they corresponded daily, and often she provided comments on his writing that help him to improve in both languages. Ken’s level of literacy when it came to his Internet practices “required competence in multiple registers, discourses, and languages, in addition to different modalities of communication (sound, speech, video, photographs) and different symbol systems (icons, images, and spatial organization)” (Canagarajah 612). These competencies across languages and modalities created venues for Ken to craft a bicultural and bilingual literacy that proved very powerful in mitigating his in-school inferior status as an “English language learner” and in validating his identity as a bicultural, bilingual individual with literacy talents in both English and Chinese

The competencies that Ken revealed in these examples suggest that a shift in perspective from second language writer’s “difference-as-deficient” to “difference-as-resource” has strong merit. Ken’s ability to read rhetorically and to learn from new genres showcase his abilities as a critical thinker and an intellectually-engaged student. His savvy skills in bringing these abilities to his English academic writing speak to the potential of a student like Ken. His abilities and his articulation of his writing approaches, processes, and challenges provide valuable insights into the kinds of contributions and discussions that Ken might offer in a classroom setting where discourse of writing had a

stronger foothold in the curriculum. In addition, Ken's strong sense of digital literacy parallel many of the ongoing conversation in composition studies about the value of such technology to our teaching of writing, and the impetus to tap into the digital literacy of our students to create richer discussions on rhetoric and writing.

### **Paul: Genre Awareness, Pop Culture, and Video Games**

Like Ken, Paul also had developed a series of rhetorical strategies and *places of validation* to assist him in the development of his English academic writing. Some of these strategies were more conventional, like studying and mimicking teacher models of assignments, but other times he developed writing ideas and strategies from more contemporary sources like pop culture and video games.

In a more conventional way, Paul brought into his classroom writing a strong sense of genre awareness. Paul often made moves to borrow from the his class texts and the occasional teacher's model. In the Robert Fulghum assignment that I discussed earlier, Paul studied the teacher's model and wrote an essay, titled, "Take a nap every afternoon." In the essay, he deliberately mimicked the teacher's casual style and narrative voice throughout the piece, writing: "So here I am in my way to school. I've no idea how my legs keep going. My breakfast was good. Scrambled eggs and [unreadable] is just got the goods." The narrative continued on as an inner monologue that documented Paul's thoughts throughout the day. For example, the paragraphs of Paul's one-page essay are interrupted by his use of "Some hours later," a time collapsing device he picked up from his teacher's model, as seen in the following excerpt from his essay:



There it is the front door. It always look like a long way to school but when you start thinking about one specific thing it seems like someone pressed the fast-forward button, 'cause when you look up the next think you [k]now is that your there, at school Now I have to go to Social Studies.

(Some hours later...)

Lunch! Finally. After sleeping for some hours, ha! some food will be great.

When I asked Paul about his use of this phrasing, he noted that he had seen the teacher do it.<sup>40</sup> He liked it because it moved the narrative along and he could get from point A in the story to point B in this essay, rather quickly. In our interview, he also noted with humor that the rhetorical device also saved him from having to come up with more ideas:

C: I like this "some hours later..."

P: (chuckles) Yeah, I didn't know what to write.

C: So did you put that in to move the story along?

P: Yeah.

This rhetorical strategy also had a very practical and pragmatic function for Paul, because he did the assignment in study hall right before class, and as he noted, "I had to rush up to write it."<sup>41</sup> So the teacher's model, in this case, gave Paul a new rhetorical device to collapse time in his writing, and it also fulfilled a practical need to finish writing quickly and to not get stalled out by lack of ideas or language. When Paul was praised for his use of such devices by his teachers, as he was here, he became more confident about meeting

---

<sup>40</sup> Whenever the students in my study turned to models, they often walked a narrow line between textual borrowing and mimicry. Often the line was based upon their own level of confidence in writing and English. If their English seemed to fail them, they leaned very heavily on the teacher's model. In other cases, if the students felt some confidence about the topic or their ability to communicate their own thoughts on a given topic, they borrowed minimally—imitating rhetorical devices and moves that the teacher demonstrated to achieve their own sense of voice and purpose.

the expectations of his teacher and his social identity among his native-English speaking peers.

For Paul, writing in English was often about aligning himself to American youth and pop culture. The lyrics scrawled on his school notebook were notably in English; they were from bands like Linkin' Park and rap artists like P.Diddy, representing the influences of American punk, rock, and hip-hop music on his world. In his writing, he made similar moves to align himself with those influences, often ending some of his written assignments with "What's up?? I'm just chilling here in my crib." In his essay on "Take a nap every afternoon," which I discussed earlier in this chapter, Paul writes about going to lunch in the cafeteria, saying "I'll just chill with my homies and stuff." In one assignment, he ended with, "O.K. then. Think about. Be a hero or a bandit. Peace Out."

The interesting thing about Paul's use of American hip-hop slang is that in many ways, it was very out of character. Paul was a perfectionist when it came to school, and he understood the need for Standard English in his academic writing. In fact, in his responses to readings for his English and other subject matter exams, he demonstrated great control in his use of academic prose. But when there was an opportunity for a little more freedom in his academic writing, Paul jumped at the opportunity to demonstrate his use of hip-hop language. In our interview, I ask him about his use of that language:

C: (reading one of Paul's essays) "I'm outty..." Is that like "I'm outta here"?

P: (shaking his head, chuckling) No.

C: Tell me what it means.

P: It .. No, like people use that expression. Like youth usually...Like saying "Peace out." Or "Bad."

C: Do you like to use those kinds of expressions or phrases like "Peace out"? see it in some of your other writing to.

P: Yeah. It adds kind of an actual sensation. Like funny, humor.

Throughout the year, it became apparent that Paul often purposefully used the slang in his writing to build greater sense of affinity to dominant native-English speaking youth culture in the school. He noted that his English teacher wouldn't mind, because "she reads them everyday" in the writing of native-English students. Unlike Therese and Miguel, Paul did not often speak Spanish in the hallways of his school, and most of his close friends were not Spanish speakers. He made concerted efforts to distance himself from Hispanic students at the school. Instead, Paul was very much engaged with the world of American youth culture, particularly in his writing, drawing on subject matter from his experiences with American movies and video games. It was a rhetorical move that was evident in his subject matter for his five-paragraph essay on Freddy Krueger and Jason, two popular horror movie villains known widely by many adolescents in today's high schools. It was also evident in his mid-term exam where Paul drew upon his experiences with video games to complete the essay portion of the exam.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, James Paul Gee has noted that "video games are deeply connected to written texts." Gee argues that students experiences with videogaming should be seen as a competency that might inform our teaching of reading and writing. In his mid-term exam, Paul demonstrated how students might draw upon such experiences when they write in the academic setting. Paul used video games scenarios and decision-making skills to complete the story starter that was one of the essay requirements for his Level 2 English exam.<sup>42</sup> The prompt read, "Jim woke up, then he saw a bright light and he heard a scream." In our interview right after the exam, he

---

<sup>42</sup> The essay prompt was discussed briefly in class before the students' began the exam, and Paul, for his part, completed other parts of the exam before turning the essay. This gave him to consider the topic, as he completed other portions of the test. In the end, he had about 40 minutes to complete the narrative.

explained at length, his invention process and his crafting of this narrative. I share the interview at length, because it provides incredible insights into Paul's writing process and in the ways in which his experiences with video games helped him to negotiate the storyline he wanted to create.

C: What did you write about?

P: I kept thinking on what to write. Whatever came up to my mind, I wrote down.

C: What did you write down? Did you have a lot of ideas?

P: It was very hard. Because...you want me to tell you the same story?

C: Yeah. I'd love to hear it.

P: So he wakes up and then he sees the bright light, and then he hears a scream. And then I wrote down that he slipped down the bed, and he rolls under the bed. And then he, like, studies the room, what is going on from under the bed. Then he goes to his closet. He is practically at his house, and then I made him go to his closet. He takes out something...body armor. After that, he hears a scream coming from the kitchen on the first floor. Then he rushes down the stair, then he trips and he rolls down.

And when he opens his eyes... it is all dark. Then he realizes that he is not at home anymore. So it is all dark, and he doesn't know where he is. And he sees a light, like in front of him. He goes to the light, and when he is there. He sees a big field, like a battle field. He is like in a video game for X-Box. So there is a lot of battling. And he puts his armor on, and he starts battling. And then, he realizes that he will be stuck here forever.

C: Wow. So he's actually in the game?

P: Yeah, sort of.

C: Is that where you got the idea? Is there a video game like this that you have at home?

P: Yeah (smiles).

In this interview excerpt above, Paul demonstrates how he brought together the various elements of his story. Gee has argued that video games "help you not only to piece together the ongoing story, but to make decisions about actions you will or will not take" (100). Similarly, Paul approached his narrative as if he were playing a video game, pausing at the end of each sentence or part to consider what moves he needed his

character to make next. Paul's experiences with video games not only influenced his content but also influenced his approach as a writer. He wrote sentence by sentence, completing one task at a time, moving up the levels, and pausing as he came to the end of each scene, in contemplation of what the next level of play might look like. In our interview, I asked:

C: When you started writing, did you know what you were going to do?

P: No.

C: How did you start? Did you go sentence by sentence?

P: In the middle when he rolled down the stairs, I didn't know what to do right after he landed. I didn't know what to write down, so I just made him appear in the video game.

Even more apparent is how much his familiarity with the genre of video game impacted his ability to write with confidence and fluidity. He noted that he "just let it go" when he was writing, and that he really "liked writing it." He also felt in complete control of the narrative, as I found in our interview on his process of writing:

C: Did you write it straight on the paper or did you make a draft first?

P: Straight on the paper.

C: Did you have to go back and cross anything out?

P: No.

C: You just wrote down what came to your mind?

P: Yeah.

C: Any problems finding words that you wanted to use?

P: No, not really.

C: So the only problem was when he got down to the bottom of the stairs?

P: Yeah.

C: How about the ending? You left him out there.

P: Yeah...I didn't have much space left., and there wasn't much time...so

C: How much did you end up writing?

P: Almost a full page.

When I asked him, how he thought the teacher will grade the essay, his reply was confident, explaining, "I think I am going to get full credit." He did.

Paul's experiences with video games and his invocation of pop culture and slang all provided him with ways to move toward a more positive social identity. His decisions to include these references, topics, and themes in his writing worked to align him with the dominant, native-English speaking culture of his adolescent peers. In doing so, he crafted a social identity for himself that was very distant from the identity of the English language learner who was foreign and vulnerable. Paul used his writing to assert a more positive social identity and to establish himself as an owner of American English and American culture. In doing so, he managed to re-write (and redefine) the expectations of his peers and teachers who acknowledged and encouraged his demonstration of competence in this area.<sup>43</sup>

I read the competencies that Paul demonstrates in these examples against the larger, emerging discussions in composition and literacy studies that suggest we need to broaden our understanding of what it means to be literate in today's world. In many ways, Paul's experiences and skills fit into the conversations that are being had about boys' literacy and technology. They are indicative of the studies on literacy and video gaming, like the work of Gee that I mentioned earlier, and studies on the writing and reading acts of boys, like Newkirk's *Misreading Masculinity* and Smith and Wilhelm's *Readin' Don't Fix No Chevys*. These ongoing discussions on broadening our conceptions of literacy and what can/should have a place in the language arts/English classroom may open up more possibilities for second language writers like Paul to showcase their skills and innovations in academic writing. As a result, students who invoke similar strategies to the ones Paul used may be considered more intellectually able

---

<sup>43</sup> This support and encouragement can be seen in the teacher response to Paul's Freddy and Jason compare/contrast essay, that I shared in Chapter 6. In her written comments on the essay, the English teacher wrote positively about the essay and Paul's creativity in choosing the topic.

to participate more fully in the kinds (and range) of writing activities that exist in the academic world and beyond.

**Therese: “Being Bilingual” as a Demonstration of Competency**

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Therese was often hesitant to draw upon her Spanish language and literacy skills when it came to her writing assignments in English and ELL classes. But her competencies in Spanish served other important functions that helped her to craft a positive social identity as an intelligent, talented, and valuable student in her school and in her community.

While Therese often felt “bad” and frustrated when it came to writing in English, she felt far more confident when it came to her Spanish-for-heritage-speakers class. The course was an advanced level literature course for native-Spanish speaking students in the school to continue developing their knowledge of Spanish language, culture and literature. It was taught by one of the school’s Spanish teachers. The Spanish course proved to be a place where Therese felt successful in her encounters with literature and writing. In the Spanish course, she could fluently and intellectually talk about her readings, her opinions, and her ideas. She could write about literary conventions, respond to readings, and analyze texts with prowess and confidence. She felt “intelligent,” academically challenged, and “like one of the best in the class.” As Therese told me in an interview: “I think I [do] well...I am the newest one here. I know almost everything about Spanish. So the teacher always tells me to read and to read aloud to the class.” On another occasion, she confidently told me about an exam she had taken in her Spanish class, saying, “It was easy. Because I’m intelligent. That’s why.”

The contrast between her sense of certainty and confidence in her Spanish class and her English class was palpable. In her Spanish class, she felt a sense of authority and ownership that translated into her writing. In this setting, she knew that she was intelligent, smart, and not hampered by language in her efforts to express her intelligence, her thoughts, and her opinions. In comparison to her English class, Therese explained, “It is different [in Spanish class]. When I have to say something, it comes out easily than when I am in my English class.” Her Spanish-for-heritage-speakers class was a place of validation for Therese, a place where she could identify herself as a strong student and showcase her intellectual abilities, reaffirming a positive social identity that enabled her to maintain her confidence when she struggled in tasks like academic English writing.

Similarly, Therese had positive experiences with writing in her school-to-work program. The school-to-work program was a federally funded program in which a small group of students is selected to participate in an 18-month program that set up work-internships for students and provides instruction twice a week on professional writing, interviewing, workplace etiquette, job searches, etc. The program tutored students, took them on field trips, created opportunities for mock interviews and conference presentations, and worked with them to create resumes, job applications, cover letters, and memos. Therese was recruited into the program, because her brother had been a prior participant. Strikingly, her status as English language learner had nothing to do with her acceptance into the program. In fact, in my observations and conversations with Therese’s school-to-work teacher, she made no reference to Therese’s status as an English language learner or any comments about her English language proficiency. In



fact, in my observations, I saw Therese codeswitch between Spanish and English with ease during these classes.

Her school-to-work teacher, Katie, encouraged Therese to use her Spanish to help a fellow Spanish-speaking student. In addition, during Therese's summer internship, one part of her job description was to serve as an interpreter for Spanish-speaking customers and to serve as a bilingual intermediary between management and the Spanish-speaking clients and employees. Her use of her Spanish in these settings was interesting because, in her other classes and other parts of her school day, Therese saw Spanish as a social language, one that she used with her friends and one that, perhaps with the exception of her Spanish class, was not part of her academic life or her academic writing. But in this school-to-work course, her bilingual abilities gave her a place of importance in the program and the workplace, and she was regularly seen as valued expert in Spanish and English. Her writing for this course demonstrated the value that this program and the class that was part of the part of the program placed on Therese's ability to negotiate between two languages. Here, she did not see the interchange of languages "confusing," in contrast to her English class where she worried about the two languages becoming confused. Furthermore, the writing for the course—all professional genres, like cover letters, memos, resumes, job applications—were all discussed with a clear sense of their rhetorical purpose. Since the program's objectives were to train students to consider employer's needs and goals when they wrote or interviewed with prospective employees, the interactive conversation in the small class regularly discussed the expectations of that employer audience and how the employee/student might meet those expectations, both in workplace performance and in workplace writing. Furthermore, since the program often

brought in business owners and human resource experts to help students with their resumes or interview skills, the audience for these genres was authentic.

**Figure 7.4** Therese's resume, an example of professional writing completed for her school-to-work program

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Therese Rodriquez</b>  <b>XX XXXXX St.</b>  <b>Mill River, XX XXXXX</b></p> <p><b><u>Objective:</u></b>          To obtain a part-time job in order to learn and utilize new employment skills, as well as to use my time in a productive manner.</p> <p><b><u>Employment:</u></b>          Summer July 2004 - Dec. 2004          -Salvation Army, Mill River [REDACTED]  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining order in the clothing closet</li> <li>• Supervised the filling and distribution of back to school backpacks</li> </ul> </p> <p><b><u>Volunteer Experience:</u></b>          Salvation Army, Mill River          9-04-Present  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translator for Spanish speakers utilizing Salvation Army Services</li> </ul> </p> <p><b><u>Community Affiliations:</u></b>          -SchoolWork Inc. Mill River North High School, Mill River          -In school employability, career and training program</p> <p><b><u>Certifications:</u></b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red Cross CPR Certified</li> <li>• Red Cross First Aid Certified</li> </ul> </p> <p><b><u>Strengths:</u></b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivated to learn new things</li> <li>• Friendly, helpful person</li> <li>• Patient</li> <li>• Bilingual</li> </ul> </p> <p><b><u>Education:</u></b>          Mill River North High School – 104 Main Street, Mill River          Class of 2008</p> <p><b><u>References:</u></b>          Available upon request</p>
--

In writing these genres and participating in this class, Therese was never identified as an “English language learner.” That deficit model was not present. Instead,

she was encouraged to construct a bilingual identity for herself, one that validated her knowledge and intelligence in both languages. Indeed, her professional writing for the course, a resume, cover letters, and memos, all reflect her sense that her bilingualism as a strength, demonstrated in her resume (Figure 7.3). In her resume and workplace writing, “being bilingual” was valuable, important, and a mark of prestige for Therese. “Being bilingual” gave her an edge over her classmates, most of whom only spoke English. Her identity as a second language writer in this classroom was in direct contrast to her identity as a second language writer in her other classes, particularly English and ELL.

Therese’s experiences with such a positive social identity helped her to remain optimistic about the ongoing development of her academic English skills. In fact, “being bilingual,” a valued member of the school-to-work program and an intelligent member of her Spanish literature class mitigated the impact of those moments when she felt unsuccessful and frustrated as a student or writer in her English or other mainstream classes. In her Spanish writing and her workplace writing, she felt competent and confident with her writing experiences; in turn these experiences provided Therese with sustenance when she felt frustrated and insecure in her other academic writing pursuits.

Therese’s demonstrations of competency in Spanish and in her workplace writing convince me that there are important bridges between those literacies and her English academic writing that should be built upon, instead of ignored. In recent years, the political climate for bilingual education in the United States has been difficult, even impossible; many states and school districts have effectively shut down bilingual education. In doing so, the value of “being bilingual” in school contexts has also been diminished. But the concept of Therese’s Spanish-for-heritage-speakers course makes

me think that there is some hope to continue to build students' sense of bilingual/biliterate capabilities in these political realities. These heritage-language courses often emphasize literary texts, conventions, and culture, along with providing opportunities for students to engage in academic writing in their native language. Those opportunities provide valuable places for students like Therese to build on her understanding of writing approaches, processes, and rhetorical situations. Heritage courses could also serve as valuable bridges to the curriculum in English classes. Therese' experiences with professional writing offers another kind of bridge into discussions on writing. In composition studies, the enthusiasm for technical and professional communication continues to grow, but we often do not consider how those discussions at the college level might be valuable for students at the secondary level. Courses on professional and technical writing at the secondary level could provide valuable places for students to explore and build upon their rhetorical understanding of how writing works across contexts. For second language writers, like Therese, these courses would provide a place where bilingualism was acknowledged as a workplace asset, instead of an academic negative.

### **Wisdom: Competencies in World Englishes, Music Production, and Poetry**

As the most experienced English writer in this study, Wisdom brought a number of competencies with him into his academic writing. As the student who had been in the United States for close to five years, Wisdom had the most experience with the U.S. school system and U.S. readers. His prior experience with Nigerian English also meant that he came to his academic writing tasks with a sense of English ownership, despite the fact that he was classified as an English Language Learner by many of his teachers. But

Wisdom, also brought with him a number of other competencies that were reinforced by his literacy experiences outside of the classroom, including a rich understanding and ongoing interest in world politics and social activism that often spurred his readings and his writing.

Wisdom's social map illustrated these interests and showed a strong sense of social responsibility, driven by a deep connection to his mother, who remained in Nigeria, and to his father, who was killed for his political activism. The symbols for his mother and father figured prominently in his map, positioned closely next to his name, where he placed those elements in his life that most inspired his writing and aided him in his academic achievement. At another place in the map, he noted that watching "[his] father getting to pay a lot of money for education [and] helping younger ones" was an influential moment in his life. When I discussed the map with Wisdom, he explained to me that his father's dedication to ensuring an education for his children remains an important touchstone for his own academic ambitions. He wanted to build on his father's legacy and feels a sense of social responsibility to be able to help provide an education for "the younger ones" in his family, both here and in Nigeria.

Wisdom's sense of social responsibility also pointed to his astute political awareness. In looking over his map, I was struck by the presence of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as two individuals who Wisdom sees as important social influences in his academic pursuits. When we talked about the map, Wisdom revealed to me that he has read multiple versions of their biographies, watched film versions of their lives, and had read some excerpts of their letters and autobiographies. He noted that he was inspired by their political activism and sense of social responsibility. He also noted



On other occasions, I would often enter the city library for our interviews and find him reading the international news section of the local paper, scanning for stories on Africa or the war in Iraq, and eager to discuss his thoughts. In our conversations, Wisdom exhibited an interest in politics and world events, and articulated how the news stories he read often reflected a certain political stance or spin, depending on the writer, the audience, or the publisher. He often articulated complex comparisons between how issues of racism and oppression existed in the U.S. and in his native Africa. Wisdom's knowledge of foreign events and politics was a competency that he enjoyed exhibiting in his other classes, like economics, civics, and even art class, but he rarely found an opportunity to connect that competency to his work in the English classroom. When Wisdom's English class failed to provide a space for him to build upon his writing talents, mostly because there was little teacher feedback and the assignments were unengaging, he found ways to demonstrate and build upon his competencies as a writer in his out-of-school activities.

Wisdom poured his passion for written language into poetry and music. As the one participant who identified as a writer from the beginning of the study, Wisdom loved language and words. He was dedicated to finding ways to express himself through writing. When he found that his English class just didn't demand that much writing from him, he began to write lyrics and compose the music to accompany his words. An example of his musical composition, titled "Let it Go," can be found in Figure 7.4. Wisdom also began experimenting with music composition, learning to use digital recording equipment and software, like the program Fruity Loops which he included in his map, to lay down tracks and beats. The musical competencies that he continued to

develop throughout the year were an important outlet that he saw as supporting, validating, and motivating him in his academic pursuits. These competencies and interests are showcased in his map, where he included “play piano,” “writing songs,” “playing the guitar” as important elements in his social world that influenced his academic pursuits.

**Figure 7.6** Excerpt from Wisdom’s song, *Let It Go*.

let it go vocals

Now you got me feel-ing so blue, what am I go-in to do? You'll al-ways  
be in, my heart. Ne-ver leave the ones you call your friends, re-  
mem-ber how it all star-ted all the things, we both... went through... Oh -  
Ooh - will you let it go, will you e-ver let it go? Oh When your friend let you  
down, will you e-ver let it go? Will you e-ver let it go?

For Wisdom, his continual work on lyrics, music compositions, and poetry sustained his passion for writing, even when he felt that his academic writing was not improving and the lack of classroom discourse on writing, that had been so much of a part of his eighth grade experiences, disappointed him. His English notebooks were filled with pages upon pages of poetry, multiple drafts and revisions, lyrics, notations about



beats and possible bridges to a chorus—all interrupting his English notes, but also maintaining his interest in the craft of writing. After school, his work in a friend’s studio, putting down beats and playing with vocals, continued to contribute to his positive social identity as an artist and a writer. His lyrics and poetry, all of them written in English, also served to reinforce his identify as an authentic owner (and competent user) of the English language.

In the final month of his English class, the teacher introduced a unit on poetry. Wisdom was thrilled, and all his energy and writing that had been building up outside the school curriculum found a home in the classroom. He excelled throughout the poetry unit. In one of our last interviews, he proudly declared the poetry unit was his best academic writing of the year, while at the same time, sliding a copy of his recently completed CD across the table for my listening pleasure.

In his work on second language writers as competent rhetors, Jay Jordan has argued that second language writers, particularly international students, often bring with them a rich sense and understanding of world events. But often our U.S. resident second language writers also have rich experiences and understandings of current events and politics that are taking place in their communities, on the national level, and on the world stage. For Wisdom, his experiences as political refugee and as a son of a political activist provided him with competencies that were reflected in his political and social awareness and his ability to persuasively articulate his views on national and international issues. As Jordan, along with Cope and Kalantzis have argued, this kind of political and international understanding is a powerful “social resource” that can bring real benefits to native-English speaking classmates with less worldly experience (Cope and Kalantzis

15). I would add to that argument that often U.S. resident immigrants, whether they have had experiences like Wisdom or not, may have interests, competencies, and rhetorical skills shaped by political and social activism that could provide similar resources for their peers and teachers.

In addition, Wisdom reminds me that the creative arts, both in writing and music, often continue to play important roles in the literacy development of second language writers, nourishing their need for language and expression in ways that academic language and writing can not. In our pursuit of preparing second language students for academic situations, scholars and researchers often overlook the importance of creative writing activities in building resiliency and positive identity associations for writers like Wisdom. I suggest that finding ways to value those kinds of writing and building bridges across school and out-of-school literacy needs to continue to drive our conversations on adolescent literacy development, because these out-of-school literacies often provide important connections for students when it comes to their academic writing.

### **Miguel: Complicating the Question of Competencies**

As I write about the other students' strength and abilities to draw upon those strengths to persevere, I have deliberately left Miguel until the end, because his is the case that I find the most compelling and also the most difficult to write about. As the student with the weakest command of English at the start of this study, and the one who struggled the most to make sense of his writing instruction and writing assignments, Miguel's building blocks are in some ways the hardest to find. Unlike Ken, Miguel did not use computers. His access to the Internet was limited to the school or the local library, and the computer at home was more likely to be used by his younger sister. Although Miguel played video

games, like Paul, he never thought of connecting those experiences to his school work and writing. While Wisdom read the front page and international news sections of the newspaper, Miguel was more likely to skim the baseball stats and scores on the sports page. And unlike Therese, he hadn't discovered the value of speaking Spanish in the workplace, and he was not as comfortable or as confident in his Spanish-language skills.

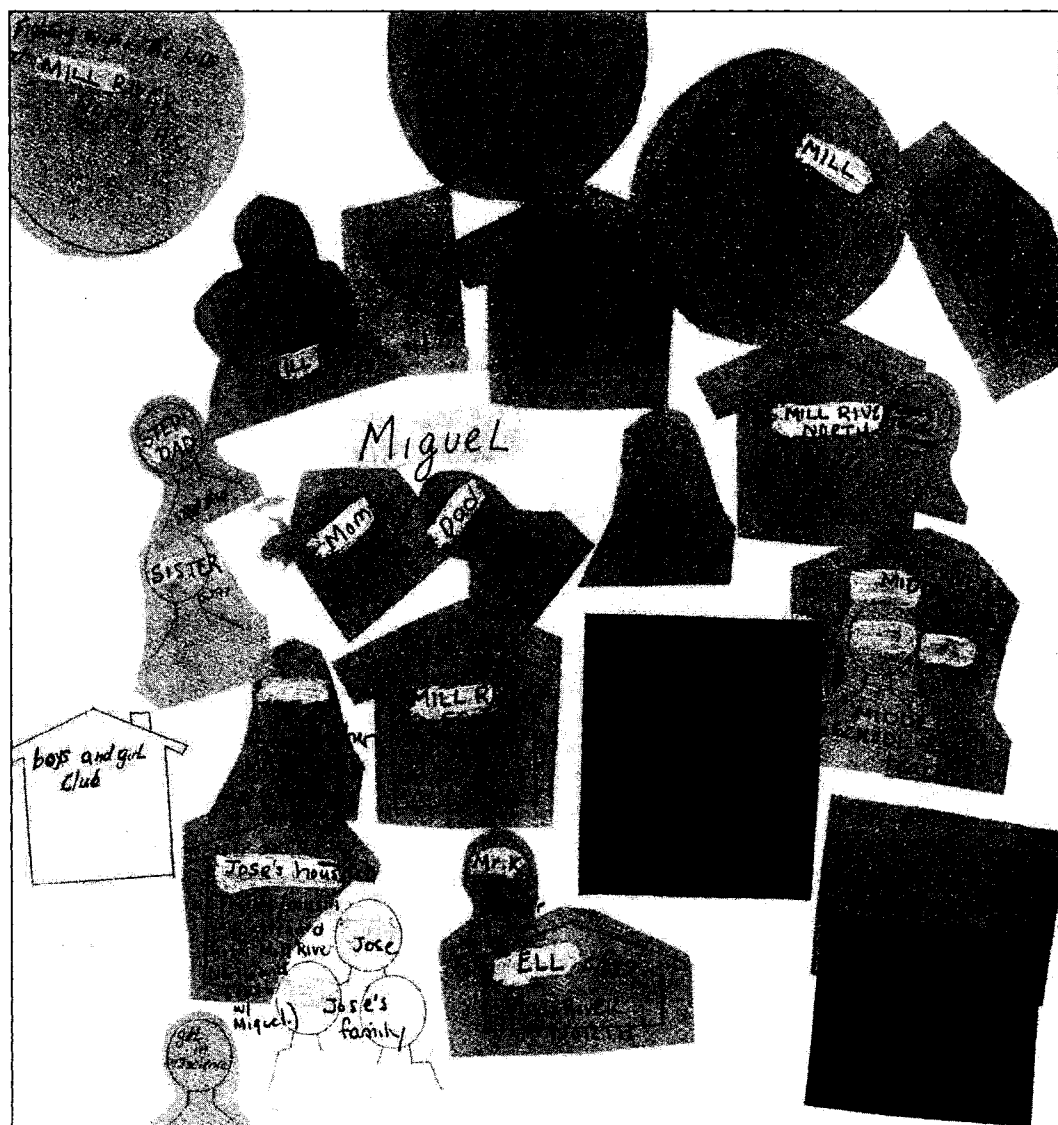
Miguel's social influence map is less cluttered than the maps of Ken and Wisdom that I shared earlier in this chapter. In some ways, that speaks to the fewer literacy resources that Miguel had to draw upon when it came to his academic writing. But his map does reveal some "stepping stones" that might prove helpful in teaching writing to a student like Miguel. These building blocks are Miguel's dedication to school, his desire to be loved and respected by his teachers, and his love of a good story.

In his map, Miguel's teachers and his schools figure prominently. He placed the symbols for teachers, certain classrooms, and his schools close to his name. Even his involvement with my research project and our conversations, which Miguel saw as a "school project" of sorts, are depicted on his map as strong influences in his desire to do well in school and in his academic writing. Although these first two building blocks are not directly linked to rhetorical and literacy competencies, I contend that they predisposed Miguel to want to work hard and to do well in school. His motivation to be seen as a "good student" meant that he was eager to do well and to garner praise from his teachers and his mother. As a result, he was a willing participant in the pursuit of building his academic literacy skills.

The third building block is more readily connected to Miguel's developing academic literacy. For his teachers, the most helpful literacy competency that Miguel

brings with him is his love of a good story. In looking over his social influence map, it is striking that he has placed two books—*Speak* and *A Boy Called 'It'*—near the center of his map.

**Figure 7.7 Miguel's Social Influence Map**



Both of these are young adult novels that Miguel read during his freshman year. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson is a young adult novel that he read aloud with his English class. *A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive* by Dave Pelzer is a memoir that shares the author's story of horrific, childhood abuse at the hands of his alcoholic

mother. The memoir was a book recommended by a teacher and which Miguel proudly read on his own and eagerly recommended to me in the following interview:

M: Well, I read this book: *A Child Called 'It'*.

C: I don't know that one.

M: You don't know that one? Oh my god. You should read that one.

C: Was it a good book?

M: Yeah, it was a really good book. But it is really sad. It is about a little kid, may be 2 or 5 or 8. But his mother treats him bad. He needs to do stuff around the house. And if he doesn't do it, she doesn't give him stuff to eat. I told [my ELL teacher] that I liked that book, and she looked for it.

C: So you read it on your own?

M: Yeah.

I read this interview excerpt as an example of the kind of enthusiasm that Miguel displayed when it came to a good book or good story. He found authority in his reading of books and stories that he enjoyed, and in the interview session, he expressed that sense of authority by recommending the book as one that I must read. He expressed the same level of enthusiasm for the short stories, like Martina Salvos "The Scholarship Jacket," that he read in English class. Although the students were often unable to take the textbooks and paperbacks home with them<sup>44</sup>, Miguel took notes and copied out entire lengthy passages that he felt were important to the plot and that might show up on the exam. In our interviews, he eagerly shared these notes, along with the plotlines, characters, and intrigues of the stories and books he read in class.

What was striking about his enthusiasm for books and stories was that Miguel was not a strong reader in English. He still struggled with new words and his reading pace was slow. But he loved the dramatic story lines, particularly those found in young

---

<sup>44</sup> Budget constraints in the Mill River School district often meant that there was a shortage of textbooks and paperbacks. The shortage of textbooks and paperbacks at Mill River North often meant that students were unable to take class readings home with them. Copies of paperbacks were often shared across three or four classes, and students were only able to read the books during class time.

adult novels, memoirs, and other “real-life stories” as he called them. And he also loved being able to talk about the stories and recommend books to his peers and teachers. He thoroughly embraced an image of himself as a reader, and I would argue that his enthusiasm for learning and his self-representation as a reader were powerful resources that Miguel drew upon to maintain his motivation to do well in school, even when he felt very disconnected from other parts of the curriculum. But these Miguel’s interests in these stories might also have served as powerful “stepping stones” for building and cultivating Miguel’s academic literacy and writing skills, if the readings had been used as connective examples to demonstrate and discuss an author’s techniques and rhetorical strategies and if teachers had been able to devote more time in the classroom to student writing (as had been the case in Therese’s English class).

In other studies of second language writers, Miguel is often the kind of student writer that never gets discussed. Frequently, he is the student who does not make it to the university campus and therefore lies off the radar screen of compositionists and scholars working exclusively with university-level students. But for English and ELL teachers working in secondary schools, students like Miguel exist in abundance and so much of the literature that we have generated on second language writers has failed to address the needs of these students and the teachers who are desperate to provide them with the literacy skills they need.

Students, like Ken, Therese, Paul and Wisdom brought with them a range of rhetorical and writing competencies often forged in their home languages and in other venues. In contrast, Miguel reported to me that his prior education in the Dominican Republic had not emphasized writing or writing instruction, and there had been few

opportunities for him to practice academic writing while he was there. Overall his experiences with literacy in his native language were far more limited than those of his fellow participants. When he arrived in the United States, the writing instruction remained limited and there were few opportunities for Miguel to practice writing. Although I would not use the term *basic writer* for the other students in this study, Miguel was the exception; I would argue that he was a basic writer<sup>45</sup> in English and in his native Spanish. Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae and others defined native-English basic writers as those students with less experience in academic writing and academic discourse. In his article “Basic Writing and Second Language Writers: Toward an Inclusive Definition,” Paul Kei Matsuda has noted “The distinction between basic writers and second language writers is becoming increasingly untenable because of the increasing diversity among second language writers and basic writers.” A student like Miguel is indicative of that blurring distinction, because there is a sense that he is a “basic writer” in both his native Spanish and in English. But if Miguel is indeed a basic writer in two languages, that does not mean that he is completely without “stepping stones” in his academic literacy development.

As I mentioned earlier, Miguel’s “stepping stones” were not as readily available or visible to Miguel himself or to his teachers. Unlike the other students in this study, he was unwilling to take risks in his writing without the direction of his English or ELL teachers. He followed the authority and instruction of the teacher unquestioningly and trusted that the teachers would provide him with the necessary tools. While the other

---

<sup>45</sup> While editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Lynn Quitman Troyka noted that definitions of basic writers reflect a “wide diversity [...] in some cases referring to a student with a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and in other cases referring to a student who academic writing is fluent, but otherwise deficient” (Call for Articles).

students in the study expressed frustration with their writing instruction and worked to develop their literacy and writing skills outside of the English and ELL classrooms, Miguel trusted that school and in particular, these classrooms were the places that would provide him with all he needed to be academically successful. That does not mean that a student like Miguel is without his own set of competencies and resources, but it does require more thinking-outside-the box and considering ways to identify and to increase the connections between those “stepping stones” and school writing so that they are more visible to second language writers like Miguel. Strikingly, Miguel’s own images of himself as a reader and a good student started to splinter and show signs of wear as the school year progressed. It was hard for him to stay invested in the image of himself as a student, when he had difficulty reading and following along with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in English class and when he received failing grades on his written tests and quizzes.

Although his teachers really liked Miguel and wanted to help him, they just weren’t sure what to do. Miguel’s perceived lack of literacy skills stumped both his English and his ELL teacher, both of whom had limited knowledge on working with second language or basic writers. His English teacher at Mill River South was not sure how to help him develop and further his academic literacy skills, and his ELL teacher often focused on the survival function of “getting homework done,” rather than on his English literacy development. To help him along, they often gave him borderline passing grades or rewrote his writing assignments for him. But Miguel continued to come to school everyday, despite these concerns, determined to pass his classes, be a good student, and learn what he could.



### **Conclusion (...and When Things Fall Away...)**

In this chapter, I have argued that the student writers in my study are not completely defined by their social identities as English Language Learners, by examining and highlighting their competencies in a range of literacy moments and academic situations. I acknowledge that second language students do often struggle when they write in a second language. The difficulties in crafting a new language, the inability to find the right words, the feeling “giving up” or “shutting down” when the English words don’t match up to their rhetorical intent or personal expectations are the genuine and challenging realities that students like Miguel, Therese, Wisdom, Ken, and Paul often face when it comes to writing. These realities and challenges that teachers, and other readers, see on the written page often underscore a false impression that these students are incapable of participating in more critical discussions on writing and rhetoric and that all they need to get by as academic writers is “the basics,” the survival genres” and the grammar edits.

Although many of the students were frustrated with their writing instruction, the lack of interesting discourse in the classroom, and their own difficulties with writing in a second language, they developed and brought with them their own rhetorical strategies, competencies, and *places of validation* that they turned to in their academic writing. Specifically, students demonstrated their intelligence and savviness by conducting genre analysis of models and mimicking other writer’s moves. They looked to their reading in both English and native-language books and periodicals, borrowing text, phrases and rhetorical moves. They drew on their outside literacies to develop their own set of strategies for meeting the demands of the academic writing assignment. They

experimented, played with their writing, and brought in pieces of their cultural affiliations. On their own, they began to piece together some of the rhetorical moves that academic writing required. They found and established *places of validation* that were used to create compelling and rich identities for the students when it came to their academic writing. The students in this study demonstrated aptitude in writing skills that move far beyond the five-paragraph essay and other survival genres that are required of them in the ELL and English classrooms. The students' experiences with professional writing, blogging, music software, and video gaming — demonstrate that these students, these second language writers, who are depicted as vulnerable and “needing the basics” have a deeper understanding of the multi-modality of texts, text forms, and audiences that are increasingly part of the work and “life-worlds” that they engage with now, and will continue to engage with in the future (Cope and Kalantzis). I suggest that if there was more place in their classrooms for rich discourse on writing and rhetoric, these students would find a place to show their academic prowess and demonstrate their literacy competencies in the English-language classroom.

I want to conclude this chapter by sharing evidence of how powerful these competencies and places of validation can be for students like those in this study and consider some of the implications when these competencies are not reinforced and reaffirmed in the classroom and when these “places of validation” fall away.

Like many of her fellow study participants, Therese experienced points of disconnection with English language literacy, but her Spanish class, the school-to-work program, and her English teacher's confidence in her as critical thinker, helped to mitigate those points of disconnection, those moments when she felt “stupid.” These

places of validation provided her with a sense of being “intelligent” and in many ways, they carried Therese through the more frustrating points of developing academic English skills and the places of disconnection that she felt toward writing in English. But during her sophomore year, many of those places of validation fell away, and it became more difficult for Therese to maintain a sense of herself as a strong, bright, and academically-gifted student.

In her sophomore year, Therese did moved up the academic track in her English class, only to find herself in a large class of 28 students. In the large class, she felt anonymous, unheard, and disengaged. She continued to take an ELL class. The ELL teacher was “nice,” but Therese explained that the class made her feel like a continual, non-owner of English. There was no follow-up course to Spanish for heritage speakers at Mill River North, so she was unable to continue her studies in Spanish literature. In addition, her year with the school-to-work came to an end, and she was no longer eligible to participate in the tutoring sessions and the professional discourse/ writing that she had developed such confidence in. And in the interest of full disclosure, my research project, in which she was involved, had also come to an end as well.<sup>46</sup> These changes in her daily school experiences felt like a loss to Therese and made her question her cognitive abilities and literacy competencies all over again. As a result, she disengaged from her schooling. In her sophomore year, she reported to me that she was failing English and science, she had been suspended once for fighting, and her attendance in all her classes was becoming increasingly sporadic. As we talked, it was apparent that so many of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Therese had noted that participating in this research project had helped her feel like she “had something to say.” At the end of the study, I offered to continue to work with during her sophomore year. At first, she was excited about the prospects, but as she became increasingly disengaged with her schooling, she declined the offer to continue my offer for tutoring and conversation.

elements that she had labeled in social influence mapping as crucial to her school investment and her academic engagement had disappeared. Therese, the girl who wanted to be a lawyer, now told me:

“I don’t think that I’m going to make it to college. I don’t get things. I’m not as smart as you think I am.”

Her words, for me, are the most telling example of how important these places of validation and these feelings of competencies are for adolescent second language writers, like Therese, and how strongly they influence these students’ social identities in the classroom and in their overall sense of academic possibilities and achievement.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **BUILDING BRIDGES: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

In this dissertation, the voices of Therese, Miguel, Ken, Paul, and Wisdom have provided insights into the writing and identity experiences of adolescent second language writers in U.S. secondary schools. Their experiences are the essential threads of this study, creating an embroidered fabric by which to view and consider complicated discussions of identity, writing instruction, educational policy, and second language writing. With their voices and experiences in mind, throughout this dissertation, I have argued that students' social identities, both as they are constructed in school and as they are constructed by the students themselves shape their development as writers. The experiences of the second language students in this study highlight connections between social identity and academic literacy development.

A student's social identity is influenced by institutionally-imposed categories and wider institutional pressures. In chapter four, I established that institutional policies, like tracking, and institutional labels, like "ELL," can create social and academic stratifications for students. Students, for their part, question, resist, and at times, embrace these categories in ways that suit their often-intertwined social and academic needs. For English language learners, these stratifications often fence them in lower-level academic tracks and position them in negative social identities that depict them as deficient and

vulnerable. Often the social identity of “being ELL” is compounded by the federal and state testing mandates that place additional pressures on schools and curricular objectives.

Furthermore, as I have shown, curricular practices in the teaching of writing can re-inscribe a student’s social identity. For the students in this study, the deficient perspective on English language learners, along with the pressures of state-mandated testing, often resulted in a limited writing curriculum that was heavily geared toward meeting the demands of standardized tests. I examined the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on the institutional identity of second language writers and on the kinds of curriculum that they experienced in their ELL and English classrooms. Specifically, I introduced the concepts of *survival genres* and examined the effects of arhetorical writing instruction. I defined *survival genres* as those kinds of curricular genres that are specifically geared to getting English language learners to pass their classes and the tests. I also looked at examples of arhetorical writing instruction and response that often negate the kinds of valuable critical thinking activities that writing instruction and practice, in the best of circumstances, can exemplify.

Finally, I complicated these questions of identity and writing in chapter seven. I argued that students were not wholly constrained by their social identities in schools and often they find places in their writing practices to exert their multiple literacies and rhetorical competencies. I looked to Canagarajah’s theoretical proposal to examine multilingual students’ differences as resources and communicative competencies. In answering his call, I have shown how the development of literacy and rhetorical competencies, both in and outside of school, can empower second language writers to embrace a meaningful sense of themselves as competent and effective writers. I have

argued that my student-participants, on their own time and of their own volition, often sought out ways to understand the kinds of writing and rhetorical purposes of writing in their own worlds. They were developing competencies as readers and writers that spoke to a variety of multi-modal contexts.

Although many of the students were frustrated with their writing instruction, the lack of interesting discourse in the classroom, and their own difficulties with writing in a second language, they had developed strategies and *places of validation* that they turned to in their academic writing. Specifically, students demonstrated their intelligence and savviness by conducting genre analysis of models and mimicking other writer's moves. They looked to their reading in both English and native-language books and periodicals and pulled on their outside literacies to develop their own set of strategies for meeting the demands of the academic writing assignment. On their own, they began to piece together some of the rhetorical moves that academic writing required. They found and established places of validation that were used to create compelling and rich identities for the students when it came to their academic writing. In some cases, these places of validation were tied to writing and helped students to establish powerful bicultural, bilingual identities which mitigated the negative effects of their status as "English language learners" and their sense that they were "stupid" in the English-language classroom. For other students, they turned to American pop and youth culture in their writing to align themselves more fully with the dominant, native-English speaking culture that surrounded them in the school and the community. In all the cases, these identity negotiations in their writing practices helped students to move beyond institutional labels

and to position themselves in more positive social identities, providing them with resiliency to face the other challenges in their academic lives.

In considering the implications of my study, I see many parallel trajectories for the field of composition and the field of second language writing. That perspective is not so surprising, given how so much of what is discussed and considered in second language writing is influenced by conversations and shifts in the composition and rhetoric.

Similarly, the increasing number of multilingual students in mainstream composition classrooms has meant an increasing awareness and interest in scholarship from the field of second language writing on the part of mainstream composition teachers and scholars. In this conclusion, I articulate the implications of this study, without distinguishing between one discipline and the other. It is a purposeful move on my part. In my estimation, the “disciplinary divide” between second language writing and composition studies has become progressively hazy as these kinds of student writers challenge the categories and sub-categories we try create, blurring the demarcation between second language writing classrooms and mainstream composition classrooms (Matsuda “Disciplinary Divisions”).

In the sections that follow I articulate some of the contributions and implications of my study toward our understanding of writing, identity, and second language writers. First, I will look at the ways in which my study has furthered ongoing discussions on the theoretical connections between writing and writer identity. I then explore the contributions I’ve made to shifting our ideological framework on English language learners and second language writers. I then discuss the state of writing and writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools and call for more cross-disciplinary engagement in



K-12 contexts. Throughout these sections, I make some recommendations for areas of future research based upon my findings.

### **Furthering the Writing-Identity Connection**

My project contributes to the growing conversations on writing and identity that Cheryl Glenn eloquently described in the theme of “Representing Identities” that shaped the 2007 Conference on Composition and Communication. In the opening pages to the conference program, Glenn stated that the theme “asks us to consider identities as they are constructed through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and silence” (5). The case studies that I’ve presented exemplify the kinds of work that Glenn has called upon the profession to engage in.

In this project, I draw upon social identity theory to consider the ways in which institutional labels and groupings construct a student writer’s identity. In doing so, I join with Roz Ivanic, Gwen Gray Schwartz, and other composition scholars who have used social identity theory to consider how students enact their identity through writing. I propose that social identity theory with its emphasis on group dynamics holds rich possibilities for our understanding of how student writers encounter issues of identity in the classroom and on the written page. As the field of composition has embraced a more socially situated view of writing, social identity theory offers an interesting paradigm by which to consider the ways in which an individual’s social identity within a university, school, or classroom influences his/her writing practices, writing goals, and writing content. As this study shows, social identity theory creates a useful framework by which to understand how students shape (and are shaped) by the categories and groups in which they find themselves.

In addition, I suggest that we need build theories of writing-identity that acknowledge how writing instruction can assist, reinforce, or impede students' quest to establish their identities as academic learners and writers. Based upon the findings of this study, I propose that writer identity and writing instruction are often linked together, shaping one another. My project suggests that writing instruction is often shaped by how writers are identified within the larger institutional frameworks and placement. In turn, writing instruction shapes writer identity with the kinds of discussions, assignments, and response that the student receives.

This writing identity-writing instruction relationship is not an absolute circle; there are openings, or perhaps broadened archways, where I see writer identity developing beyond instruction and beyond curriculum, as demonstrated by the experiences of my student participants. The connection between writing and identity is often found in students' writing practices, those that exist both in the formal curriculum and in their other literacy experiences. Some of those out-of-school writing experiences filter back back into the classroom. . Often they represent opportunities for student writers to feel successful, if those out-of-school literacy experiences are allowed entry, space, and dialogue in the curriculum. Likewise, the writing curriculum in the school can shape a student's identity, in both positive or negative ways, feeding back into the writing practices; sometimes writing instruction can fail to connect with students and their day-to-day writing practices.

In considering future research on writing and identity, I see possibilities for inquiry into questions of identity and writing that might look at other segments of the student population that have been categorized by similar kinds of institutional labels, like

ELL. In particular, I think studies looking at the effects of such labels on the identity and writing of Special Education students or Honors students may hold interesting insights into how identity, writing, and writing instruction are linked together for other groups of adolescent writers. There are also opportunities to replicate aspects of this study with college-level students at a range of two-year and four-year institutions.

### **Implications for First-Year Composition**

*Issues in second language writing permeate many aspects of our work as writing program administrators. We need to be prepare new instructors and retool existing instructors to work with an ever-growing population of second language writers in writing courses[...] We need to design new courses or modify existing courses to provide placement options appropriate for the changing student population as well placement procedures that are sensitive to language differences.*

- Paul Kei Matsuda, Maria Fruit, and  
Tamara Lee Burton Lamm (11)

In their introduction to the recent special ESL issue of *WPA Journal*, Matsuda, Fruit, and Lamm call upon writing program administrators (WPAs) and college compositionists to better prepare college writing instructors, to design and modify college writing course offerings, and to rethink placement procedures for the “changing student population.” As I read their call, I am reminded that Miguel, Therese, Ken, Paul, and Wisdom are part of that “changing student population,” working their way through U.S. high schools and working toward their place as first-year college students. Their stories and experiences as high school academic writers and “English language learners” have implications for college composition teachers and WPAs. In this section I discuss these implications by looking at issues of placement and training.

As Matsuda, Fruit, and Lamm point out, WPAs have a responsibility to place second language students into the kinds of courses that would suit them best. But those placements are becoming difficult to define when it comes to U.S. resident second language students or as they have been called “Generation 1.5.”<sup>47</sup> WPAs, second language writing specialists, and mainstream college composition teachers have found that U.S. resident second language students are often hard to identify, difficult to distinguish, and resist the labels we try to place upon them. My study suggests some U.S. resident second language students may be purposefully elusive when they arrive on college campuses. They may have worked diligently and purposefully to distance themselves from negative connotations of “being ELL” during their high school years and view college as an opportunity to finally move beyond that label. Culturally, they may identify more with their native-English speaking peers than with international students. Furthermore, their experiences in high school may mean that they see “ESL” sections of first-year composition as “remedial,” and they may resist being reinscribed with a label that they have historically found to equate deficiency and vulnerability. At the same time, they may (or may not) be underprepared for college expectations of writing if they have received only limited writing instruction, limited writing practice, and limited teacher feedback in the high school. These variables challenge WPAs and

---

<sup>47</sup> I use the term “Generation 1.5” here with some caution. As I and other second language writing specialists, including Harklau, Matsuda, and Schwartz have articulated in other publications and venues, the term “Generation 1.5” has become a problematic term. Over the past five years, the term has become more familiar and popular among writing specialists and instructors. On one hand, the term has brought attention and interest to the issues of U.S. resident ESL students and their writing. (Ortmeier-Hooper, *forthcoming*). But on the other hand, as Schwartz has also pointed out, “the term Generation 1.5 is overused, and its meaning has become diluted so that it no longer serves to be very useful in identifying, describing, and placing such students” (43). My study illustrates some of the complexities of what has been termed the “Generation 1.5” population.

college instructors to reconsider common practices and procedures in our placements of such students and in our teaching.

As students like Miguel, Therese, Wisdom, Ken and Paul increasingly enter our colleges and universities, the time has come to rethink our placement procedures and options for such students. In many ways, my study provides a compelling rationale for WPAs to consider alternative methods of placement that go beyond one-shot essay exams and allow for the range of linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences that U.S. resident second language writers often bring with them. One example of this kind of alternative placement procedure is the “online directed self-placement (ODSP)” as piloted by Wright State University. Deborah Crusan in her article, “The Politics of Implementing Online Directed Self-Placement” notes that ODSP provides for more student agency over the traditional one-shot essay placement process and includes more variables that are inclusive of second language writers than traditional directed self-placement (DSP). As Crusan describes it:

ODSP is multi-dimensional, uniquely weighted online direct self-placement instrument which weighs indicators and variables germane to the university student population.[...it is] an online process in which students provide basic demographic information and respond to a questionnaire. L1 and L2 students have separate questionnaires addressing issues most important to each population.

The online placement system allows *all* students to answer questions at their own pace, and the questions consider both cognitive and affective variables, including prior experiences with writing in a range of settings. For WPAs challenged by the increasingly diverse range of student writers, the promise of such a placement alternative is that it

provides students with a greater sense of agency in the placement process and encourages them to carefully consider their own writing practices, previous instruction, and abilities.

In the college composition classroom, instructors often find many U.S. resident second language writers are entering mainstream first-year composition classrooms over “ESL” sections for a number of reasons. As Matsuda, Jordan, Ortmeier-Hooper and Cox have explained in the introduction to *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*,

some campuses may have a shortage of second-language specialists and second-language dedicated sessions, which effectively force students into mainstream composition classroom. Where there are sufficient sections of second-language writing, those courses may be remedial and/or noncredit bearing, which discourages many students from taking that option. [...] Furthermore, the very definition of what it means to be an ESL writer can vary greatly, depending on institutional definitions and students’ experiences with the term, leading students to reject ESL courses as stigmatized. (2)

With U.S. resident second language writers entering mainstream composition classes, the lines between composition and second language writing pedagogy will become increasingly “blurred” (Matsuda, Jordan, Ortmeier-Hooper, Cox 2). As my project suggests, some of these students may have received limited writing instruction in the high school setting, others will still struggle with the “stumbling blocks” of writing in a second language, and still others will be well-prepared based on their own innovations and determination. The implication here is that all mainstream composition instructors need to be prepared to address the needs of a wide range of second language writers.

Currently, as Matsuda, Cox, Ortmeier-Hooper, and Jordan have noted:

second-language students in first-year composition continue to encounter curricula, assignments, and assessment practices that are not designed with their needs and abilities in mind, and even the most conscientious of composition teachers often have not been given access to the background or resources to make their instructional practices more compatible with their students. (2)

Composition instructors at all college-level institutions should become engaged in the ongoing discussion on second language writing and “Generation 1.5,” particularly in the areas of course design, writing assignments, peer feedback, and teacher response. At individual institutions and meetings among first-year writing faculty, The CCCC Statement of Second Language Writing and Writers and its selected bibliography remains a valuable starting point for those kinds of discussions. In addition, WPAs should support and encourage all college writing teachers, both pre-service and in-service, to understand the needs of second language writers and to develop inclusive pedagogical practices that meet the needs of culturally and linguistically students. Finally, in an effort to help composition instructors develop inclusive practices in the college classroom, they should be encouraged to take courses on second language writing, read related reference materials, and attend local and national workshops, like those sponsored by the Committee on Second Language Writing at CCCC.

### **Shifting Our Ideological Framework on ESL Writers**

In Cope and Kalantzis’ collection, *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and Design of Social Features*, Joseph Lo Bianco has argued passionately that:

The policies of education systems in many countries, which seek continually to define the literacies and languages of immigrant minority and indigenous students as defective by assessment against the established norms, could be subverted by attaching recognition to the potential

articulacy of these same students. [...] Many children utilize complex literacy awareness and talent daily; literacies which invoke ethnic, ideological, religious, script, technical and nation-identity statuses in a marketplace of authorized, traditional, and hybrid forms. Like spoken literacy, diversity in the plural literacy practices of minority children is often relegated to the margins of their literacy. Yet they have within them the power to open up new intellectual worlds which are, at the moment, linguistically and intellectually closed to us. (100-101)

In this dissertation, I have illustrated the range of “complex literacy awareness and talent” that immigrant second language adolescents use in their daily lives. Therese, Miguel, Wisdom, Paul, and Ken invoke a range of “ethnic,” “ideological,” “technical” identities in their writing and writing practices. I acknowledge that second language students do often struggle when they write in a second language. The difficulties in crafting a new language, the inability to find the right words, the feeling “giving up” or “shutting down” when the English words don’t match up to their rhetorical intent or personal expectations are the genuine and challenging realities that students like Miguel, Therese, Wisdom, Ken, and Paul face when it comes to writing. These are the realities and challenges that teachers and other readers see on the written page and they often underscore a false impression that these students only need the basics or are incapable of participating in more critical discussions on writing and rhetoric. Such instructional practices ignore “the plural literacy practices of minority children” and “[defines] the literacies and languages of immigrant minority and indigenous students as defective” (Lo Bianco 101).

In examining the social identities and writing of Miguel, Therese, Wisdom, Paul and Ken, I have strived to show the fluidity of “being ELL” at the secondary level. In sharing the story of Wisdom’s resistance to and subsequent re-identification with the



label of English language learner, I have highlighted the fluid ways in which students engage and resist their identities as second language learners. That fluidity is also present as students move across institutional contexts. In one school context, the pressures of state-mandated testing and shifting demographics, may create a definition of “English language learner” that is deemed different, deficient, and vulnerable. But in other school contexts, like those exemplified by Miguel’s experiences at Mill River South, English language learners may be prized and singled out for the diversity they bring to the school. In the first kind of context, students may question their intellectual abilities; in the second context, some students may feel “othered” by their status as “diversity tokens” in a given school.

As I think about the possibilities for future research on second language writing and writers, there remains a tremendous need for more research on the literacy and writing of U.S. resident students and immigrant student populations in other English-speaking countries. Researchers might also pursue questions similar to the ones I have raised in this project in schools with bilingual programs or among demographically different student populations. I would also recommend large-scale, comparative research initiatives that look at adolescent second language writers across schools, perhaps in different parts of the country. Such studies would provide us with a stronger sense of the kinds of writing instruction that are available to these students and the effects of writing instruction on overall student academic achievement.

Finally, in current conversations of “Generation 1.5 students,” much of the focus has been on the varying cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds of these

students.<sup>48</sup> Often studies have compared them to international students and looked closely at the differences in and among the “Generation 1.5” population. But in that conversation, there has been very little discussion on the shifting identities that the students themselves bring to this puzzle and what experiences in the secondary schools may be provoking those identity shifts. Students, like those in this study, are often very used to shifting their identities in the high schools setting, and they can be wary of the labels and categories that writing program administrators and college writing teachers want to place upon them. On some occasions, they may wish to be viewed as second language writers or “ESL writers” and on other occasions, they may wish to resist and push away from that label because it depicts them as foreign or deficient or vulnerable. In the same vein, there may be moments where they embrace their linguistic and cultural heritage and language, there may be other moments when they embrace their bilingual/bicultural identities, and then there may be moments where they embrace the dominant American culture, particularly the popular culture of their native-English speaking peers. As college writing teachers and writing program administrators, we need to respect those shifts on the parts of students and not place judgments, based on our own socio-political perspectives, on which identity affiliation is the “best one” for U.S. resident second language writers to embrace. In the end, these kinds of challenges and questions point to a need for a larger shift in our perspectives on second language and multilingual students across grade levels

---

<sup>48</sup> For an example of these ongoing conversation on placement and categories, see Patricia Friedrich’s “Assessing the Needs of Linguistically Diverse First-year Students: Bringing Together and Telling Apart International ESL, Resident ESL, and Monolingual Basic Writers.” *WPA Journal* 3:1-2 (Fall 2006): 15-36.

### **The Neglected “R’s”: Writing and Rhetoric**

*The rhetorical situation is made up of a number of important elements: the writing assignment (if any), the writer’s purpose(s) and the stance toward the topic, the audience for which the writing is intended, and the genre of writing and kind of language these elements seem to call for.*

- Andrea Lunsford, *The St. Martin’s Handbook 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (43)

In the *St. Martin’s Handbook*, Andrea Lunsford provides a representative definition and a concept of rhetorical situation that is commonly discussed and considered in many college composition classrooms across the nation. When I think about the writing experiences of the students in this study, I am struck by the missed opportunities to engage these high school students in discussion on rhetoric or the rhetorical situation. For my part, I see that lost conversation as the missing analytical piece that contributes to students’ understanding of writing as an intellectual and critical thinking activity. It is also a piece of the conversation on writing that can provide students with strategies and questions to consider as they engage in writing across the curriculum and in their other activities. In many ways, my study shows how students are prepared to engage in these kinds of conversations or thought processes, even if their writing still shows signs of limitations or error. But these kinds of conversation will remain on the outskirts of the secondary school curriculum, if writing and writing instruction continue to be short-changed in the time-conflict with other curricular goals.

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to show the kinds of pressures and conditions under which teachers and students operate within the high school classroom. In 2003, the National Commission on Writing noted similar concerns in its report, *The*

*Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution.* The report found that “writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom” (3). The Commission’s report demonstrates that the findings that I have articulated in this study are representative of larger, national trends across schools and districts. My findings, like the findings of the National Commission on Writing, reiterate the marginalized place of writing in the English classroom and demonstrate that it is the question of time and resources that remain the most difficult to remedy. Federal and state educational policies, like No Child Left Behind, can both motivate shifts in curriculum, but they also can have negative impacts, like pressuring teachers to teach to the tests, encouraging students to focus on form and “survival genres” over critical thinking and discovery. Furthermore, lack of textbooks for all students, lack of technology, and perhaps most importantly, lack of time—in some schools—can contribute to this blindspot in the curriculum. English teachers especially feel the pressures of an ever-expanding curriculum and growing literacy demands. Many English teachers enter the profession seeing themselves as teachers of literature, when the reality is that they are being increasingly called upon to see themselves as teachers of literacy. The push-and-pull between literature and literacy, coupled with 45-minute class periods means that writing is often pushed to the far-edge of the curriculum.

In this study, I have demonstrated that the result of these kinds of pressure means that students receive less writing time. Perhaps even more importantly, there is less time for the kinds of discourse and discussion on writing that composition studies has found to be crucial in helping students to develop their identities as writers, along with their writing skills. That lack of conversation means that students do not develop the kinds of

critical thinking skills and rhetorical analytical skills that they will need for higher education and the work place. As the National Commission on Writing found:

Despite the neglect of writing instruction, it would be false to claim that most students cannot write. What most students cannot do is write well. [...] Writing at the basic level demonstrates only a limited grasp of the importance of extended or complex thought. The responses are acceptable in the fundamentals of form, content, and language. [...] However, about, three-quarters of students at all grade levels are unable to go very much beyond that. By grade 12, most students are producing relatively immature and unsophisticated writing [...] The difficulty is that they cannot systematically produce writing at the high level of skill, maturity, and sophistication required in a complex, modern economy. (16, 17)

The Commission concluded that “more attention must be paid to writing. More time must be found for it. And teachers must be provided with the time and resources required if they are able to perform their work professionally” (21).

As I consider my findings from this study, it is the question of time and resources that brings me to following implications for schools, teachers, and the field of composition. One solution to the issue of class time that is alternative options for writing support and instruction that would exist beyond the formal English literature curriculum in the high school. Specifically, I see a need for an expansion of writing courses and offerings throughout the four years of high school. At the college level, the evolution of composition studies over the past twenty years has created a variety of writing courses and options beyond first-year composition. Writing minors and majors are possible at many colleges and universities, along with growing programs at the masters and doctoral level. Our conversations at the College Conference on Composition and Communication have moved beyond the first-year course, as we explore digital literacies, professional communications, writing-across-the-curriculum, and more. Yet in the high school English

classroom, writing often remains only about survival, the five-paragraph theme, and lockstep procedures. Adding a writing department and required writing courses to an already full curriculum and full school day is a bit of long shot. School reform of that magnitude is a difficult, slow-moving task. But I do think it is the goal that we need to pursue in the long-term. In the short-term, there are more realistic and tangible goals that have the potential for real shifts in the way writing is incorporated into the school curriculum.

One short-term goal would be the promotion and establishment of writing centers in secondary schools. As Pamela Childers has pointed out, writing centers often can inspire the kinds of change that I have advocated for above. Childers, a long-time high school writing center director and scholar, notes that high school writing center can serve an important function in schools, saying, “I [know] that the most advanced, the least skilled, and highly creative writers all [need] a place for their writing, a community of writers, an ear to listen, and a voice to respond” (ix). Currently, only a relatively small number of high schools across the nation have writing centers. But Childers and other writing center scholars have long advocated for creating these kinds of spaces in local high schools in order to increase the writing and rhetorical skills among students and to promote discussions on writing among students and faculty. High school writing centers also bring with them the possibility for extended support for student writing beyond the bounds of the curriculum and the time pressure of the classroom. As Childers noted, these kinds of initiatives, particularly when they are purposefully structured and presented as “non-remedial,” can have benefits for all students. Writing centers also have the potential

to become starting places for faculty development and writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives in the high school context.

Beyond the secondary school campus, university-level composition programs have a responsibility to support secondary school teachers in the teaching of writing. As Composition Studies programs, including majors and minors, master's programs and Ph.D. programs continue to grow, there will be more opportunities for new English and ELL teaching majors to take these kinds of classes. They should be encouraged to do so. As the National Commission on Writing determined, "It will not be reasonable to ask more from classroom instructors unless they are also provided with more assistance. Teachers typically receive little instruction on how to teach writing" (23). I would expand upon that by noting that a single course on the teaching of writing does not begin to express the kinds of innovations, theoretical shifts, and possibilities that the field of composition has embraced in past two decades. Often prospective teachers take a single course on the teaching of writing; that is even less true of teachers preparing to teach in other disciplinary areas. For prospective English teachers, in particular, courses on the theories and histories of composition would broaden their understanding and investment in the teaching of writing, making it a more comprehensive and inclusive part of their curricular practice.

In support of these kinds of initiatives, I offer the example of Therese's first-year English teacher who taught both Advanced Placement (AP) and Level 1 courses with rich discussions on writing, rhetoric, and revision. She attributed the important place of writing in her classroom to her English education program which was led by a trained compositionist and had multiple options for coursework on composition and the teaching

of writing. As compositionists, we have the opportunity to become more involved with building these kinds of course offerings and opportunities for English education students. So that future English teachers might view themselves as not only teachers of literature, but also as teachers of composition and literacy. In addition, organizations like CCCC and its members must continue to strengthen their involvement in the National Writing Project and other professional development initiatives that reach secondary level teachers that are already in the classrooms.

### **A Cross-Disciplinary Call for Active Engagement in K-12 Issues and Schools**

In 1971, Janet Emig questioned the lack of resources that “[dealt] in the adequate theoretical and empirical depth with how students of school age write” (1). Her questions were an early call to writing instructors and researchers that is reflective of our beginnings as a professional and academic discipline. Indeed, our roots in composition have reflected an interest in literacy studies and practices of student writers that was not strictly sited on the college campus. Yet, as the field of composition has strengthened its place in the academy, it has on many fronts turned away from its earlier connections to education, K-12 students, teachers, and their schools.<sup>49</sup> Currently, composition research and publications on workplace writing, situated learning, digital literacies, writing-across-the-curriculum, composition histories, civic discourse and so on demonstrate how much the field has evolved and taken shape beyond the first-year course. But, as we reach beyond the first-year course in so much of our work, we are also positioned to rediscover

---

<sup>49</sup> Much of this estrangement is due in part to historical issues of prestige and worth in the academy. As Eli Goldblatt and Steve Parks have noted, “Too often university faculty do not frame even out teaching mission in such a way as to class ourselves with schoolteachers and community educators. The difference in privilege and autonomy make such alliance seem impossible. There is [...] little in the tenure and promotion reward structure to encourage long-term engagement by faculty with public school or community organizations” (587).



the high schools, vocational schools, middle schools, and elementary schools as important sites of research and discovery.

Some compositionists, like David Russell and Thomas Newkirk, have already taken up this call by expanding the scope of their work to include student writers at the elementary and secondary school levels. Other compositionists, like assessment specialists Peggy O'Neil, Brian Huot, and Sandra Murphy, have been actively involved in researching the effects of secondary school writing assessments for incoming college students, teachers, and writing curriculum. But there is a need for studies that consider the issues of second language writing and second language writers in those kinds of research projects. That more inclusive perspective is indicative of an ongoing call for all compositionists to develop an understanding of second language students and their needs as writers, as articulated in the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers. It is often difficult to develop that kind of specialized knowledge in the short term, but compositionists might join together with second language writing specialists and teacher educators to form research teams that are better equipped to consider the culturally and linguistically diverse student population in K-12 settings.

For second language writing researchers, studies in U.S. K-12 schools and on K-12 writers remain scarce. Given the large numbers of second language writers existing in these educational contexts, these students and places have much to contribute to our understanding of second language writing. This is particularly true, given the interest in "Generation 1.5" or U.S. resident second language writers. Our understanding of U.S. resident second language writers can never be complete if we do not inquire into the experiences of those student writers in their secondary schools and the experiences of

their teachers. At the same time, we might also fulfill an ethical obligation to consider the connections between academic literacy development and the high-school attrition rates of the U.S. resident second language writers. In doing so, we might broaden our understanding of L2 writing to include those student writers who never make it to our college campuses in the first place.

If compositionists and second language writing specialists foster these kinds of inquiry projects, the dissemination of these findings to teachers and school administrators—along with the research and knowledge that we already hold—is an important responsibility. Publications in scholarly journals and presentations at college-level conferences are unlikely to reach English and ELL teachers in the classrooms of the schools. Given that reality, one implication of this study is that there needs to be more active dissemination of our findings and the pedagogical implications of those findings to the teachers (whether they be teachers in ELL, in mainstream English, or across the disciplines) and the schools that need them. This is particularly true of research on second language writers, but also for mainstream composition where wonderful discoveries in the teaching of writing, digital literacies, genre theories, rhetoric, and professional communication remain unconnected to the students and teachers in the secondary school setting. For college writing scholars, one possibility is to generate more pedagogically-focused materials, publications in teacher-orientated journals (like *Essential Teacher*, *NCTE Chronicle*, and *English Journal*), and presentations at national teacher-orientated conferences (like TESOL, AERA, and NCTE).<sup>50</sup> We should also foster a localized

---

<sup>50</sup> The advent of the Second Language Writing Interest Section (SLW-IS) at TESOL is one attempt to broaden the landscape of second language writing inquiry and dissemination. The mission of the SLW-IS is to bring together teachers across institutional contexts and grade levels to engage more fully in the

presence by offering discussions, demonstrations, and workshops at local teacher conferences and through local school districts.

Broadening our venues of dissemination might also include, or provide the impetus for, creating and participating in research initiatives that foster “a scholarship of engagement”<sup>51</sup> in which university researchers work side-by side with K-12 teachers, and teacher-educators to inquire into how to best to meet the needs of all student writers in these institutional contexts and classroom settings (Boyer). The National Writing Project and university-sponsored initiatives, like the UNH Literacy Institutes, are important programs that have the power to bring K-12 teachers into dialogue and conversation about the teaching of writing. But there is also a need for fostering cross-institutional and sustained conversations between college writing teachers, writing center directors, and secondary school writing teachers. One possible model for building these kinds of sustained dialogues includes the Calderwood Conversations, a reading group at the University of Maine-Farmington, that brings together writing teachers from high schools and college writing faculty to share their expectation and standards for student writers across grade levels. To further these kinds of initiatives and promote their value to the

---

discussions on the teaching of writing and further our understanding of second language writers across these contexts.

<sup>51</sup> Danling Fu, drawing upon the work of Boyer (1996), has described “a scholarship of engagement” as particularly way for researchers to participate in K-12 school reform, while at the same time pursuing their research agendas. As Fu explains from her own experiences:

Rather than going to a setting with specific research questions and purpose, the researcher, who was first invited as a staff developer, helped the school make changes or reform the existing programs for improving newly arrived ELLs’ school achievement. With the support of school administrators, the researcher worked closely with the school faculty in search for effective ways of teaching through her involvement as a participant observer. Instead of remaining an outsider or objective researcher, she actively participated in the process of school improvement, which started with individual teachers with the understanding that what was tried successfully would be promoted school-wide. The kind of research represents an innovative ways for a researcher and teacher-educator to engage in helping schools to improve instruction, while concurrently conducting research. (Fu, “Writing Development and Biliteracy,” 11)

larger conversations on writing and literacy, we need to consider these places of dialogue and conversation as research sites and share how they began, how they work, and what they achieve with our college composition colleagues.

Finally, we might build better networks for these kinds of initiatives and forms of engagement by taking a more active role in teacher-training. Composition and English graduate program administrators should encourage English majors and English education majors to enroll in composition courses, both as undergraduates and as part of Master-level programs. Indeed, Master-level programs in English education and E.S.L. should require their students to take more composition courses in theory and pedagogy, including coursework in special topics like writing centers, writing-across-the curriculum, and second language writing. At the same time, doctoral students in Composition Studies should have the opportunity (and should be encouraged) to engage in conversation and research with K-12 teachers as part of their degree programs by participating in the National Writing Project, programs like the UNH Literacy Institutes, NCTE, and other teacher-focused writing programs and conferences.

In the end, I am advocating for a K-16+ perspective on composition and second language writing that articulates and, most importantly, enacts an understanding that writing and our development as writers is indeed a lifelong endeavor.

### **Epilogue: Personal Encounters and Public Voices**

*“Why don’t they just learn English? Maybe if their parents actually learned the language, they would too.”*

*“I’m thinking of pulling my kid out of public school. Those kids slow down the class ---they have to move slower to make sure those kids understand stuff.”*

*“How many of them are sons and daughters of illegals anyway? Many of them are illegal themselves. They’re taking advantage of tax-payer funded schools.”*

*“Do you know how much money and time these kids are costing us?”*

*- Callers comments during a recent, local AM talk radio program on immigration and immigrant students in local schools.*

I sit in my car on my way to retrieve my two sons from preschool, waiting for the red light to change and listening to the radio. As I scan the radio stations, I hear the voices above. It is yet another A.M. talk radio program on the “problem” of immigration and immigrant students. As I drive, I listen to the rhetoric, the prejudice, and the anger. My initial instinct is to turn off the radio or change the channel. But I don’t. I listen, aware that this is the larger audience whose voices influence the teachers in the schools, the parents in the PTA, the peers in the classroom, and the lives of immigrant students like those in my study. The voices are representative of the voters in the election booths who mark their ballots against bilingual education or to limit public school funding.

I share this personal narrative because the stories and experiences of Miguel, Therese, Wisdom, Ken, and Paul do not exist in a vacuum. They exist against a powerful political and discriminatory backdrop fueled by media programs like the one above and national debates on “English Only” legislation. As a daughter of immigrants, I take these

discussions personally. My work with English speakers of other languages means that I am often in the trenches of the schools, well-versed in the literature, and surrounded by colleagues who understand the science and research of second language acquisition and literacy. It can be insulating work among those with the same passion and understanding of language learning. Then I turn on the radio or find myself at a backyard BBQ with some distant acquaintance commenting on the “damn illegal Hispanics” who abuse welfare and “speak nothing but Spanish at Walmart.” Suddenly the insulation breaks down, and I see my work in the wider context of American politics, prejudice, and public opinion.

In recent years, the field of composition has moved into the civic or “public turn” as termed by Paula Mattheau. As Mattheau and others have noted, college writing teachers and scholars increasingly consider pedagogies and theories of writing that encourage students to write as a form of civic engagement through service learning initiatives, community literacy projects, and writing courses that include ethnographic writing and discussions on civic discourse. We urge our students to take writing out of classrooms and into their communities. But we, too, as researchers, teachers, and writers, in composition and second language writing need to be part of that “public turn” as well. As composition scholars and second language writing specialists, we are uniquely poised to engage in the very public discussions on immigrant and adolescent literacy development, the teaching of academic writing, writing assessments, the state of the English curriculum, and the connections between writing, educational advancement, and academic achievement. Increasingly, federal and state governments are calling for “research-based” and “research-proven” methods of literacy and writing instruction. *This*

*is what we do as a profession*, but the forums for these kinds of discussion are often very far removed from our typical professional venues of journals and conferences. Yet, at the same time, these public forums (including: talk radio, local and national newspapers, FOX and CNN News, school board meetings, state houses, the Departments of Education and the U.S. Congress) influence millions of voters, parents, teachers, and children throughout this country—including millions of student writers and teachers of writing. As linguistic and culturally diverse students enter more and more classrooms, as writing instruction is increasingly pushed to the margins of the curriculum or codified for mass consumption, and as teachers struggle to assert their knowledge and power in the curriculum, we have arrived at a threshold. Here, in this time and space, there is the possibility for a renewed commitment on the part of composition as a field and on the part of individual scholars to write our own way into that civic discourse and to find our public voices.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Problems. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 134-65.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing." PRE/TEXT 3.3 (1982): 213-343.
- Brandt, Deborah. Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Britton, James, et al. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18): A Report from the Schools Council Project on Written Language of 11-18 Year Olds. London: Macmillan, 1975.
- Brooke, Robert. Writing and Sense of Self: Negotiating Identity in Writing Workshops. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. "The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued." College Composition and Communication 57.4 (2006): 586-619.
- Casanave, Christine Pearson. Controversies in Second Language Writing. Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers. Ed. Diane Belcher and Jun Liu. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Casanave, Christine Pearson. "Uses of Narrative in L2 Writing Research." Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction. Eds. Paul Kei Matsuda and Tony Silva. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005. 17-32.
- Chiang, Yuet-Sim D., and Mary Schmida. "Language Identity and Language Ownership: Linguistic Conflicts of First-Year University Writing Students." Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition. Eds. Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey and Meryl Siegel. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999. 81-96.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth. Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook/Heinemann, 1991.
- Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures. New York: Routledge, 2000.



- Conference on College Composition and Communication. "Statement on Second Language Writers and Writing." College Composition and Communication 52.4 (2001): 669-74.
- Connors, Robert, and Andrea Lunsford. "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers " Selected Essays of Robert J. Connors. From *College Composition and Communication* 44.2 (1993): 200-23. Eds. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 236-58.
- Crowley, Sharon. "The Current-Traditional Theory of Style: An Informal History." Rhetoric Society Quarterly 16.4 (1986): 233-50.
- Crowley, Sharon. The Methodical Memory. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.
- Crusan, Deborah. "The Politics of Implementing Online Direct Self-Placement for Second Language Writers." The Politics of Second Language Writing: In Search of the Promised Land. Eds. Paul Kei Matsuda, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper and Xiaoye You. W. Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2006. 205-21.
- Cummins, Jim. Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society, Second Edition. Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education, 2001.
- Davidson, Anne Locke. Making and Molding Identity in High School: Student Narratives on Race, Gender, and Academic Engagement. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1996.
- Devitt, Amy J. Writing Genres. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Dyson, Anne Haas. "Coach Bombay's Kids Learn to Write: Children's Appropriation of Media Material for School Literacy." Research in the teaching of English 33.4 (1999): 367-401.
- Dyson, Anne Haas. The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write : Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.
- Edelsky, Carole. Writing in a Bilingual Program : Había Una Vez Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986.
- Emig, Janet. The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1971.
- Farrell, Pamela (Ed.). The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989.

- Ferris, Dana. "One Size Does Not Fit All: Response and Revision Issues for Immigrant Writers." Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of English. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999. 143-58.
- Friedrich, Pamela. "Assessing the Needs of Linguistically Diverse First-Year Students: Bringing Together and Telling Apart International ESL, Resident ESL and Monolingual Basic Writers." WPA Journal 3.1-2 (2006): 15-35.
- Fu, Danling. My Trouble Is My English: Asian Students and the American Dream. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995.
- Fu, Danling, and Marylou Matoush. "Writing Development and Biliteracy." The Politics of Second Language Writing: In Search of the Promised Land. Eds. Paul Kei Matsuda, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper and Xiaoye You. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2006. 5-29.
- Gee, James Paul. What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Glau, Gary. "Current-Traditional Rhetoric." Theorizing Composition: A Critical Sourcebook of Theory and Scholarship in Contemporary Composition Studies. Ed. Mary Lynch Kennedy. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. 73-75.
- Goffman, Erving. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- Harklau, Linda. "The Role of Writing in Classroom Second Language Acquisition." Journal of Second Language Writing 11 (2002): 329-50.
- Harklau, Linda. "ESL Versus Mainstream Classes: Contrasting L2 Learning Environments." Enriching ESOL Pedagogy: Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry. Eds. Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.
- Harklau, Linda. "From High School to College: English Language Learners and Shifting Literacy Demands." 10th Biennial Composition Studies Conference. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, 2004.
- Harklau, Linda, Meryl Siegel, and Kay M. Losey. "Linguistically Diverse Students and College Writing: What Is Equitable and Appropriate?" Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition. Eds. Linda Harklau, Meryl Siegel and Kay M. Losey. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999. 81-96.
- Harris, Joseph. A Teaching Subject : Composition since 1966. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.

- Heath, Shirley Brice. Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Herrington, Anne, and Marcia Cross. Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College (Refiguring English Studies) Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.
- Hillocks, Jr., George. "Fighting Back: Assessing the Assessments." English Journal 92.4 (2003): 63-70.
- Horner, Bruce, and John Trimbur. "English Only and U.S. College Composition." College Composition and Communication 53.4 (2002): 594-630.
- Hudelson, Sarah. Write On : Children Writing in Esl. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1989.
- Ivanic, Roz. Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1998.
- Kanno, Yasuko. Negotiating Bilingual and Bicultural Identities: Japanese Returnees Betwixt Two Worlds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.
- Kapper, Jessie. "Mapping Postsecondary Classifications and Second Language Writing Research in the United States." The Politics of Second Language Writing: In Search of the Promised Land. Eds. Paul Kei Matsuda, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper and Xiaoye You. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2006. 247-61.
- Kobayashi, and Rinnert. "High School Student Perceptions of First Language Literacy Instruction: Implications for Second Language Writing." Journal of Second Language Writing 11.2 (2002): 91-116.
- Lambeck, Linda Connor. "Local Schools Receive Failing Grade." Connecticut Post. August 25, 2006.
- Leki, Ilona. "'Pretty Much I Screwed up': Ill-Served Needs of a Permanent Resident." Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition. Eds. Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey and Meryl Siegel. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.
- Matheiu, Paula. Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.
- Matsuda, Paul. "Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Disciplinary Division of Labor." College Composition and Communication 50.4 (1999): 699-721.

- Matsuda, Paul Kei, and Keven DePew. "Early Second Language Writing: An Introduction." Journal of Second Language Writing 11.Special Issue. (2002): 261-68.
- Matsuda, Paul. "Basic Writing and Second Language Writers: Toward an Inclusive Definition " Journal of Basic Writing 22.2 (2003): 67-89.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei, A. Suresh Canagarajah, Linda Harklau, Ken Hyland, Mark Warschauer. "Changing Currents in Second Language Writing Research: A Colloquium." Journal of Second Language Writing 12.2 (2003): 151-79.
- Matsuda, Paul, Maria Fruit, and Tamara Lee Burton Lamm. "Second Language Writers and Writing Program Administrators." WPA Journal 3.1-2 (2006): 11-13.
- McCracken, Hugh Thomas. "Why Not Vacuous?" English Journal 92.6: 9-10.
- Mosley, Milka Mustenijova. "The Truth About High School English." What Is "College-Level" Writing? Eds. Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006.
- National Commission on Writing. The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution. College Board, 2003.
- National Commission on Writing. Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket out, a Survey of Business Leaders. College Board, 2004.
- Nero, Shondel. "Language, Identities, and ESL Pedagogy " Language and Education 19.3 (2005): 194-211.
- Newkirk, Thomas. "The Narrative Roots of Case Study." Methods and Methodology in Composition Research. Eds. Gesa Kirsh and Patricia A. Sullivan. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1992.
- Newkirk, Thomas. The Performance of Self in Student Writing Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- Newkirk, Thomas. Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.
- Norton, Bonnie. Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity, and Educational Change. Harlow, England: Pearson, 2000.
- Nunnally, Thomas. "Breaking the Five Paragraph Theme Barrier." English Journal 80.1 (1991): 67-71.

- Nystrand, Martin, et al. Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.
- Oakes, Jeannie. Keeping Track : How Schools Structure Inequality. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Ogulnick, Karen ed. Language Crossings: Negotiating the Self in a Multicultural World. New York: Teachers College, 2000.
- Peregoy, Suzanne, and Owen Boyle. Reading, Writing, & Learning in ESL : A Resource Book for K-12 Teachers New York: Longman, 2001.
- Roberge, Mark. "Responding to the Needs of Immigrant English as a Second Language (ESL) Students: An Ethnographic Case Study of a College Composition, Basic Writing, College ESL Program." Unpublished dissertation. University of California, Berkeley., 2001.
- Rose, Mike. Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared. New York: Free Press, 1989.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Sheila, Merrill. "'Why Johnny Can't Write.'" Newsweek 3 (1975): 58-65.
- Silva, Tony. "Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing: The ESL Research and Its Implications." TESOL Quarterly 27.4 (1993): 657-77.
- Smith, Michael W., and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm. "Reading Don't Fix No Chevys": Literacy in the Lives of Young Men. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.
- Sunstein, Bonnie. "Culture on the Page: Experience, Rhetoric, and Aesthetics." Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy. Eds. Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. 177-202.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John Turner. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1979. 33-47.
- Tarone, Elaine, et al. "The Writing of Southeast Asian Students in Secondary School and University." The Journal of Second Language Writing 2.2 (1993): 149-72.
- Thompson, Thomas S., ed. Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002.

- Trujillo, Melissa. "Nearly 1 in 5 Mass. Schools Not Making Adequate Yearly Progress." Associated Press. September 12, 2006.
- Tsui, Amy, and Maria Ng. "Do Secondary L2 Writers Benefit from Peer Comments?" Journal of Second Language Writing 9.2 (2000): 147-70.
- Turner, John C. Social Influence. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1991.
- U.S. Department of Education. Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Title: III. DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002.
- U.S. Department of Education. Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. English Language Learners and the U.S. Census 1990-2000. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002.
- U.S. Department of Education. Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. English Language Learners and the U.S. Census 1990-2000. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002.
- U.S. Department of Education. Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. English Language Learners and the U.S. Census 1990-2000. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002.
- U.S. Department of Education "Fact Sheet: NCLB Provisions Ensure Flexibility and Accountability for Limited English Proficient Students Fact Sheet: NCLB Provisions Ensure Flexibility and Accountability for Limited English Proficient Students." Washington, DC (February 2004): U.S. Department of Education. January 27, 2007. <<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/schools/factsheet-english.html>>.
- Villalva, Kerry Enright. "Reforming High School Writing: Opportunities and Constraints for Generation 1.5 Writers." The Politics of Second Language Writing: In Search of the Promised Land. Eds. Paul Kei Matsuda, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper and Xiaoye You. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2006. 30-56.
- Villalva, Kerry Enright. "Hidden Literacies and Inquiry Approaches of Bilingual High School Writers." Written Communication (in press).
- Villanueva, Victor. Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

Yi, Youngjoo. "Asian Adolescents' out-of-School Encounters with English and Korean Literacy." Journal of Asian Pacific Communication 15.1 (2005): 57-77.

Zamel, Vivian, and Ruth Spack, eds. Negotiating Academic Literacies: Teaching and Learning across Languages and Cultures. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998.

## APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Questionnaire 1**

Dear Students,

If you are interested in participating in the study, I have a few questions that I would like you to answer. Please answer as honestly as you can. Please return these questions to me on Tuesday when we get on the bus for our field trip to the University.

If you have any questions, please ask me. Thanks so much.

- Christina

1. Your name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Why would you like to be part of this research project?
4. How many years have you lived in the United States?
5. What languages do you speak at home?
6. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If yes, how old are they and where do they go to school?
7. Do you like to read and write in your own language?
8. Do you like to read or write in English? Why or why not?



9. Did you study English before coming to the United States? If yes, for how many years?

10. What high school are you going to attend this fall?

11. Will you be taking any ESL classes at your high school?

12. Do you think you would have any problems in meeting with me after school two times a month (usually on Thursdays) until June?

13. Do you or your parents have any questions or concerns about this project?

14. What is the best way to reach you – telephone or email?

Your telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Your email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Your home address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire – Research Project on Writing in High School

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the answers that best fit your experiences during the past year. Please also write down where (or from whom) you learned the skill. If it was before high school, write that down as well.

### Writing Skills

Skill	Have you learned this skill?			Where? From whom?	Have you used it this year?		
Punctuation/Capital Letters	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Run-on sentences	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Thesis statement	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Prewriting	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Brainstorming	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Making a web for ideas	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Revising	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Editing	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Proofreading	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
First draft	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never

Skill	Have you learned this skill?	Where? From whom?	Have you used it this year?
Using a computer for your writing assignments	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Using a computer to cut-and-paste your sentences or paragraphs (to move them around)	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Using a computer to check your spelling	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Using a computer to check your grammar	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Writing a bibliography or works cited page	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Citing quotations or paraphrases from other sources, like books or the Internet	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never
Conferencing with a teacher	Yes      No      Not sure		Often      Sometimes      Never

### **RESPONSE AND FEEDBACK**

Please circle or write in the answers that best match your experiences with getting advice on your writing assignments this past year.

Kinds of feedback or advice on your writing	How often did you receive this kind of response in your writing assignments?	From whom? Which class?	Did you revise based on those comments?
---	--	-------------------------	---

Kinds of feedback or advice on your writing	How often did you receive this kind of response in your writing assignments?			From whom? Which class?	Did you decide based on those comments?		
Written comments from teacher	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Oral comments from teacher - <i>during class</i>	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Oral comments from teacher - <i>after class</i>	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Comments on content (ideas, organization)	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Comments on grammar (spelling, word choices, punctuation, sentence structure)	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Comments from other students <i>in class</i>	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Comments from other students <i>outside of class</i>	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never
Comments from other grown-up readers	Often	Sometimes	Never		Often	Sometimes	Never

In general, when you received comments from your teachers on your writing, how did you use that feedback?

What do you think about the following statement?

*“Many times, students who speak English-as-a-second –language are graded in an easier way on their writing than students who are native-English speakers. They are graded on effort, not on the actual writing.”*

### **CONCEPTS IN WRITING.**

I have listed below a number of concepts or words used to talk about writing. Please circle or write in the answers that best match your experiences this past year.

Concepts in Writing	Have you heard this term this year?			Where? From whom?	Is it something you think about when you write?		
The Writing Process	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Purpose	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Audience	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Thesis Statement	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Revising or Revision	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Editing or Proofreading	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Peer Conferencing/Workshop	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Conferencing	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
The 5-paragraph essay	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never

Introduction	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Conclusion	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Using supporting ideas	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Using details in your writing	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never
Plagiarism	Yes	No	Not sure		Often	Sometimes	Never

### GENRES

I have listed below a number of different kinds of writing. Please circle the answers the best match your experiences this past year. Then write in the classes where you did that kind of writing.

If I have missed any type of writing, please add it in at the bottom of the list.

Genres (Kinds of writing)	Have you done this kind of writing?				In which classes?
Writing about books and stories	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing poetry	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about other people	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing persuasively (making an argument)	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing for tests (essay tests)	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Lab reports	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Research report	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	

Genres (kinds of writing)	Have you done this kind of writing?				In which classes?
Writing in a language other than English	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Journal writing	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Reading response journal	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about a personal experience	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about historical or social event	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about a current event	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing a speech	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing a book review	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing a letter	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing a formal letter	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing a personal letter	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing creative stories	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing the 5 paragraph essay	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about your goals	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Writing about yourself (true stories or experiences)	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Notes on a book	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	

Genres/Kinds of writing	Have you done this kind of writing?				In which classes?
Notes from a lecture	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Notes from the board	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Other:	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	
Other:	Often	Sometimes	Once	Never	

### QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. What was it like to be part of this research project? (Be honest.)

### CURRENT CONTACT INFORMATION

Your Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Your current phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be willing to meet with me in October/November for a follow-up interview and to let me know how you are doing in school?



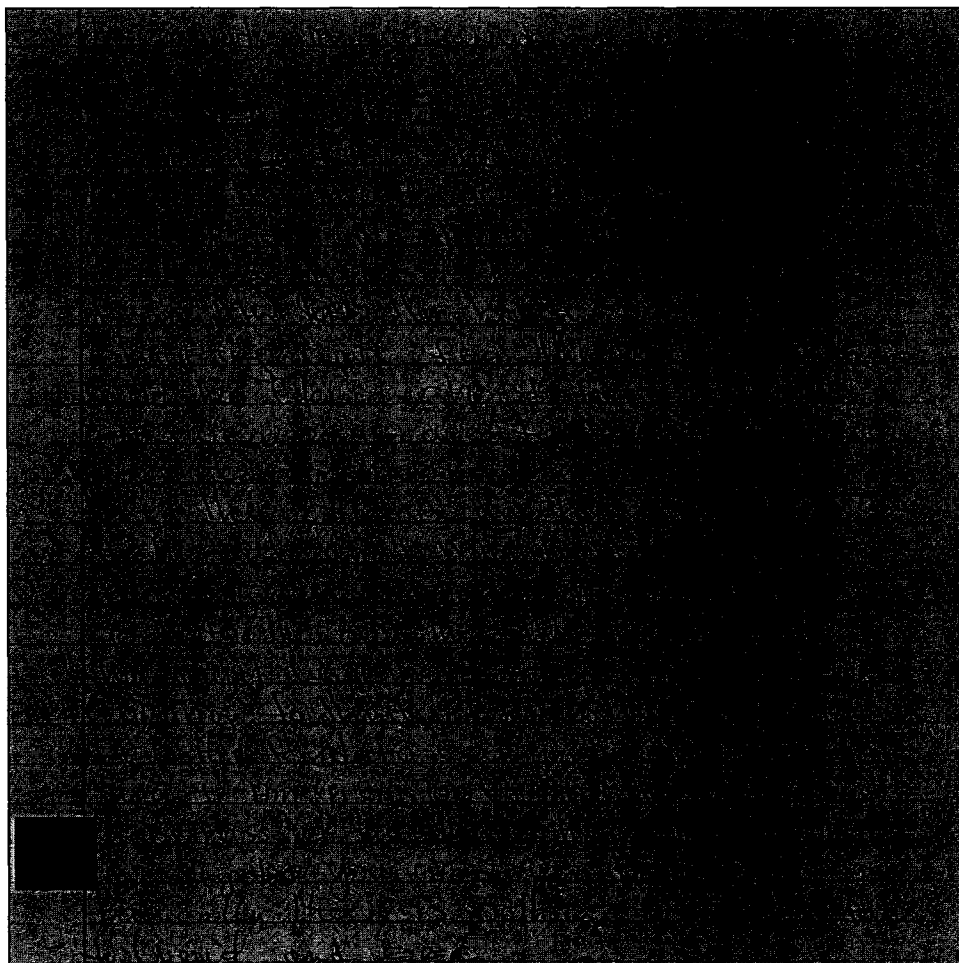
**GENERAL QUESTIONS:**

1. What was your favorite piece of writing that you wrote for school this year? Why?
2. When it comes to writing a school assignment, has anything changed in the last year for you?
3. What do you think about writing instruction and assignments in high school?
4. In regards to school, what was your biggest disappointment this year?

5. In regards to school, what is the most important thing you have learned about yourself?
6. What changes have you noticed in your English over the last year?
7. When do you think you will stop being an English Language Learner (ELL) or an English-Speaker-of-Other-Languages (ESOL)?
8. How important is it for you to sound or to write like a native-speaker of English? Please explain.
9. What are your goals for next year – in regard to school and academics?
10. What are your goals for the future? (after high school and beyond)

**Appendix C: Wisdom's mid-term essay with teacher's comments.**

The essay was written in response to a teacher's prompt and based on the class reading of *Zachariach*, a science fiction novel.



## Appendix D: IRB Approval



UNIVERSITY of NEW HAMPSHIRE

August 2, 2004

Ortmeyer, Christina  
 English - Hamilton Smith Hall  
 24 Shelly Drive  
 Derry, NH 03038

**IRB #:** 3267  
**Study:** The writing experiences of secondary school ESL writers  
**Approval Date:** 07/30/2004

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 110 with the following comments:

- *The investigator needs to provide an oral explanation of the assent form when presenting it to students.*

**Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above.** At the end of the approval date you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at <http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/IRB.html>.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or [Julie.simpson@unh.edu](mailto:Julie.simpson@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB

Julie F. Simpson  
 Manager

cc: File  
 Paul Matsuda

Research Conduct and Compliance Services, Office of Sponsored Research, Service Building,  
 51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585 \* Fax: 603-862-3564